

Sophie's Tales

Jaroslav Kriz

I wrote these tales for my little granddaughter Sophie, so they are hers: Sophie's Tales. But she is a very good girl and she will lend them to you. They happen to be about Sophie and her friends. Don't ask me if she is the same little girl as that who owns them: she is and she is not. You tell me that I cannot have it both ways? Well, anything can happen in these tales.

JK



Secret place

There was a secret place in a town named Annie Tree – or was it Annie Three? I forget. Did I say it was secret? Actually, it was the secretest of most secret places. Nobody knew about it except for Sophie and the tomcat called Tom – and Tom was the laziest cat in the whole Universe and beyond. He usually did not even speak except occasional “meeow”, which could mean “give me a break” (not that he was interested in breaking anything if it took much energy) or “give me a candy”. Have you ever heard about a cat eating candy? Well, I never. Tom was a special cat.

Where was I? Oh yes, the secret place. Of course, I cannot tell you where it was, because it would not be secret any more. But I can give you a few hints. When you come to Annie Tree and find the part where the trees are tallest – at any rate much taller than Sophie – you will be on Travel Road. It speaks for itself: you will be on travel – or should I say in Travel? Anyway, there is a nice grey house on this road and if you are quite smart, you will find your way into its backyard which is in the back but is much larger than one yard or even ten yards. In fact, it is a quite large garden with the usual inhabitants such as grass and grasshoppers and daisies and daisyhoppers (these are tiny flies, ruby in color, which fly around hoping to find a daisy) and various birds and bears... oh, I beg your pardon, bears are not usual and, between you and me, no bear was ever really seen there. There were some rumors about them but really it was only a woodchuck, whatever it is, but he is presently on travel so it does not matter anyway.

If you cross the garden – supposing Father had cut the grass so that you can see where the other side of the garden is – you will find some bushes and behind them a half-broken wooden fence and behind it... Well, anything could be behind the fence, for example a wild forest with moss-covered cliffs and deep caves inhabited by strange animals with huge eyes and even larger ears which serve them as wings as well. But this is not important because Sophie never went over the fence and neither did Tom. He was too dignified or too lazy to do anything so rash. However! One day Sophie came to the bushes, with Tom at her heels, and suddenly, wait for it, there was a tiny opening between them.

“It looks like a path,” said Sophie.

“It leads to nowhere,” said Tom, speaking for once.

“How do you know?” asked Sophie.

“It’s pathological,” said Tom.

“Never mind,” said Sophie. “Let’s go to nowhere then.”

“It will be a long walk,” said Tom. “We should take some rest first.”

“You already rested half a day,” said Sophie.

“It was only the first part of it. Now, I will take the rest.”

“You can lie down as much as you wish. I am going.”

“Meeow,” said Tom reverting to his ordinary habits.

Tom was a very lazy tomcat but he was also very curious if not directly nosy in spite of his short nose. Thus he followed Sophie on the path till they both came to the Place. It was quite a large space considering that it should not have been there at all. It was surrounded by the bushes and seemed to be rather ordinary except for a large sign in the middle of it. It said:

NOW HERE

“How do you read it?” asked Sophie.

“Cats do not read,” answered Tom in a dignified manner.

“It looks to me like we are here,” said Sophie. “It says that it is now but why to say it? It could not be yesterday, could it?”

Tom did not answer. Take it from me, you cannot rely on tomcats if you have a problem with time.

“What do you think you are doing here?” asked a rabbit wearing some uniform with many badges and things who suddenly emerged from the bushes. He was a captain of the rabbit assault commandos but Sophie did not know it.

“I have not done anything except thinking,” said Sophie.

“That’s the worst kind of doing,” said the captain-rabbit. “Don’t you know that this is a secret place? Nobody is coming here.”

“But suppose...” began Sophie.

“That’s not my job,” said the captain-rabbit. “We have specialists for it.”

“I suppose,” said another rabbit in a funny robe emerging from the bushes.

“And I assume,” said another one. “It’s much better.”

“And I hypopopo...” said a third one.

“He has a slight stutter,” said the captain.

“Well,” said Sophie, “can you suppose or assume or hypo-whatever that we are here?”

“Yes, we can,” said the specialists.

“OK,” said the captain. “You are officially supposed to be here. So you can supposedly look around.”

“There is nothing here,” said Tom who had taken a short nap during the preceding procedure.

“Quite to the contrary,” said the captain-rabbit. “There is everything. It depends only on your supposition.”

“Very well,” turned Sophie to the first specialist. “Suppose there is a castle here.”

And lo and behold, a glittering golden castle emerged before them with many towers and wings (I do not mean that it was a flying castle) and whatever such a castle should have. It looked a bit like having been built from a building set Sophie had at home but it was a castle. The only problem was that it was so small that maybe a baby-rabbit could squeeze through its tiny door but not Sophie. She was a little girl but tall for her age.

“Can you assume,” she turned to the second specialist, “that the castle is bigger so that we can enter it?”

Again, lo and behold, the castle grew before their eyes. In fact, the assuming rabbit was showing-off and overdid it a little: now the castle was huge and, what was much worse, it was surrounded by a deep moat.

“Can you swim?” asked Sophie Tom.

“Cats never swim,” said Tom with dislike. “How can you even suggest such a disgusting thing!”

“Then we must..,” turned Sophie to the third specialist. “Could you hypo... No, it would take too much time. Let’s simply suppose we have a flying carpet.”

“The flying carpet is in repair,” said the captain-rabbit. “Something wrong with its gears. The only transport means we have at the moment are the seven-miles boots.”

“They will not do,” decided Sophie. “I need two of them, which makes fourteen miles in one step. And Tom needs four, which makes... even more.”

Sophie was not very sure with multiplication but she was right: the seven-miles boots would not do.

“Can we suppose having a drawbridge over the moat?” she asked the supposing rabbit.

“Yes, we could, but...”

“No buts!” said Sophie sternly.

With much rumbling and screeching, a shabby drawbridge held by rusty chains fell over the moat. Evidently, the supposing rabbit was somewhat tired.

“Quick,” said Sophie to Tom.

“What’s the hurry?” protested Tom.

“This bridge will not last long.”

“And how shall we come back then?”

“We will think of something.”

“Meeaw,” said Tom meaning that there is not much use in trying to argue with a stubborn girl.

They ran over the drawbridge and entered a huge hall with glittering golden walls and tall windows made up from rubies and emeralds so that the light inside was many-colored. At the far end of the hall there was a very ornamental throne on which some majestic figure in a purple robe sat surrounded by the courtiers: several elegant skunks, each with a bottle of deodorant at his hip, some lower-standing squirrels with very ornate tails and a numberless number of chipmunks who ran around chattering in rapid high voices.

“His majesty the Woodchuck,” announced the chipmunks to Sophie.

However, they said it very rapidly and one over the other so that Sophie did not understand properly. Did they say the woodchuck? Sophie thought it to be a fairy-tale figure: everybody talked about it but nobody saw it really. Therefore, she turned her attention to a very long dining table to which the chipmunks constantly brought more exquisite food. She noticed very big blueberries at her side of the table. Sophie liked blueberries but – well – were they not somewhat overgrown? Actually they were as big as her head, maybe larger.

“You cannot eat me,” said the blueberry to which she reached. “I am too big.”

And, as if it wanted to stress the point, it grew even bigger.

“Yes, but assuming...,” began Sophie.

“Who are you to assume anything?” thundered the Woodchuck. “You are only supposed to be here.”

“So are you,” answered Sophie fearlessly.

“That’s a fact,” said the Woodchuck and lost much of his majestic air. In fact he shrank on his throne and covered his nose because one of the chief courtier skunks somehow forgot his best manners and a horrible stench came out of him. It was so horrible that even the walls began to crumble down and rubies and emeralds started to fall out of the windows saying that they can stand almost anything but there is always a limit.

But the hall was huge and before the stink came to Sophie, she was able to eat several blueberries which she assumed to be the right size. And, needless to say, Tom spoiled his stomach by a number of candies, which he denied afterwards.

Nonetheless, there was time to go back. Sophie with Tom came to the drawbridge and tried to step on it.

“Hrreeeaoughwrum,” said the drawbridge and fell in peaces into the moat.

“I told you so,” said Tom. “What are we going to do now?”

“We only have to assume...” began Sophie.

“No assuming will save you,” cried the chipmunks running out of the castle.

Horrified by the skunk’s smell, they even jumped into the moat and soon filled it up so that Sophie and Tom could cross over on their backs. At the other side, they looked back and saw that the whole castle fell down. In the middle of its debris, a lone skunk stood with an uncertain smile.

“What happened?” said he. “Did I say anything wrong?”

At the same time, a mild wind brought a little sample of his smell to Sophie and Tom. Needless to say, Tom was not lazy to run for once – in fact, he was the first to return into the garden.

After several steps in the grass, Sophie looked back at the bushes.

“It looks like there is no path there any more,” she said.

“There is no path and it leads nowhere,” said Tom.

“You cannot have it both ways,” said Sophie. “Assuming that...”

“Don’t start again,” snarled Tom. “I am going to take a little nap.”

“But just suppose...” said Sophie.

“Meeaow,” said Tom.

At this the conversation stopped. Tom found a nicely warm place on the porch and took a nap and another one and, after some pondering, another one or two. And Sophie sat beside him and tried to remember what the third rabbit specialist was doing: the first supposed, the second assumed, and the third hypo... something.

Did they go to that place again? Well, all about that place is very secret and I already told you much more than I should have done.

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Lost way

Did I tell you how Sophie lost way one day in Annie Tree? Well, she did and as the tomcat Tom was with her, he lost his way too. So there were two ways lost, Sophie's and Tom's. What do you do in such case? Yes, there is (or there was in my days) an Office where you sometimes could get back lost things such as briefcases, shoes (usually only one), mittens (usually not yours), hats and whatnots. But they have strange ways in that Office: they never give you back your lost way. So Sophie and Tom had to look for it by themselves.

On their way (not that which they looked for but the new one) they met a dog. It was lying down on the porch of a rather strange – not quite red and not quite brown – wooden house and it looked like it was sleeping.

“Doggie,” said Sophie.

The dog opened one eye.

“Did you talk to me?” he asked morosely.

Well, it was really rather strange to address him in such a way: he was not one of these cute little doggies you can put into your pocket, he was not even middle-sized but simply huge! But Sophie somehow did not notice it. She had a feeling that, according to the expression of his face, the dog must be very sad.

“Why are you so blue?” she asked.

It was a new phrase she heard nowadays from somebody – maybe a bluebird.

“You should see a doctor,” said the dog. “Something is wrong with your eyes. I am a brown-and-white dog with some black patches. I am a Saint Bernardin dog, you know.”

“Do dogs have saints, too?” asked Sophie.

“They do not as far as I know although they should considering what they have to endure. Let's say simply I am a Bernardin.”

“I am Sophie,” said Sophie. “Can I call you Bernie? It's shorter.”

“As you wish,” said Bernie resignedly.

“I did not mean your color before but your mood,” said Sophie. “Why are you so sad?”

“I am not simply sad. I am melan...choly,” said the dog.

It took him quite some time to say this strange word because he put a long yawn in the middle of it. If Tom held the world-wide record in laziness then Bernie was his strong challenger.

“And what are you melan-something about?” asked Sophie.

“It's the state of the Universe,” said Bernie and closed his eye again.

“Is Universe in a state?” asked Sophie. “Daddy was in a state when the grass-cutter went out of order. Is it something like this?”

“Haven't you heard? It's expanding. Everything gets larger all the time.”

“This can't be true,” said Sophie. “My T-shirts shrink after washing.”

“There are always exceptions,” growled Bernie. “But take this grass patch in front of the house. I have a hidden bone somewhere here but I forgot where. And now this place is expanding so that every time I make my mind to go and find it I have a lower chance to succeed. So I do not even try.”

“It's really your own bone?” asked Sophie with wonder.

“Not from my body. Just a bone.”

“And you want to eat it?” asked Sophie.

“Heaven forbid! I would not risk my last teeth. But every dog has to have a hidden bone. It's a matter of principle,” said Bernie.

“Just typically doggish,” said Tom who took a short nap in the meantime.

Bernie opened his eyes and started to get up. It took quite some time because it was a really big dog.

“Was it this imitation cat behind you who squealed something against dogs?” he growled.

“Don’t fight,” said Sophie. “We have to work together. We are going to help Bernie to find his bone and he will help us to find our way home.”

“Could you tell me how such an ever-expanding oversized mummy of a dog could help us?” said Tom ironically.

“Dogs have a very good smell,” said Sophie.

“He cannot sniff out his own stinking bone.”

“But I can smell a mouse disguised in a shabby cat costume. And what’s more, I can tear them both up, mouse and its mangy robe,” roared Bernie making a leap.

“You would lose your dentures in the process,” answered Tom leaving his place with a surprising agility.

Bernie chased him around the grass patch. As they ran in a circle, it was soon difficult to see who chased whom. But Tom knew very well who was at the chasing end. And he soon started to feel an acute need of rest.

“I smell a bone,” he cried.

“Where?” roared Bernie stopping in his tracks.

“Here,” pointed Tom with his tail and immediately made several soft steps to clear off from the reach of Bernie’s paws.

Bernie started to sniff vigorously at the indicated place.

“I don’t smell anything,” he said in a baffled way. “Well, maybe something... but... did you say a bone?”

“Maybe you have a cold,” said Tom. “It numbs your smell, you know.”

“Yes, I have not been quite myself lately,” said Bernie in a melancholy way.

“There is definitely a bone there,” said Tom. “Or something like it.”

Bernie started to dig furiously with his paws so that a geyser of soil flew around him into the air. And, suddenly, he vanished.

“There was a dog,” said Tom philosophically, “and there isn’t any more. It’s the way the world runs. So we could continue...”

“Wait,” said Sophie. “He could be in trouble. Bernie,” she shouted into a hole where Bernie vanished, “are you all right?”

“No,” came his muffled voice from the hole. “I cannot get back. It’s too deep.”

“Maybe I could give you a hand,” said Sophie.

“Are you out of your mind?” asked Tom. “This dog weights a ton at least.”

“There is a tunnel here,” said Bernie below. “I will try it.”

“A tunnel?” said Sophie. “Come, Tom. It could be a shortcut.”

“A shortcut where to?” whined Tom.

But, not wishing to stay alone, he climbed after Sophie into the hole.

“This tunnel leads to nowhere,” he said.

“You keep saying such things,” said Sophie. “A tunnel is bound to lead somewhere.”

“I don’t see why. There are various kinds of tunnels. And I can’t see any light in front of us,” grumbled Tom.

“It’s because of Bernie’s shade,” said Sophie. “But I already see some.”

And really, after some more crawling, all three came to the end of the tunnel. But when they peeped out, they were petrified by astonishment. The landscape they were seeing was quite different from anything they knew: there was reddish-brown sand everywhere and occasional red cliffs which looked like some crude statues. There also were some very tall greenish plants which badly needed a shave as Sophie thought. But most strange was a big

animal standing or sitting – it was difficult to tell – in front of them and looking at them with curiosity.

“Er... sorry to bother you. Could you tell us where we are?” asked Bernie.

The animal did not answer.

“He probably does not speak English,” said Tom. “He looks like a very overgrown mouse, I would not trust him.”

“Why not?” asked Sophie.

“He has such scheming expression.”

“Let’s wait what he has up his sleeve,” said Bernie.

“He has no sleeves,” said Sophie. “But he has a pocket on his tummy. Which means it’s a kangaroo, I saw one in a book Daddy showed me.”

“Which means...” started Tom in a startled tone.

“Yes,” said Sophie. “It looks like we overdid the shortcut. We must be in Australia.”

“I told you!” exclaimed Tom. “You with your shortcuts! They always end up in an endless walk.”

“This is a contradiction,” said Bernie. “How could anything end in something which has no end?”

“Ask Sophie,” answered Tom curtly. “The important thing is that I do not trust this kangaroo. He may be dangerous.”

“Why, he is single and we are three,” said Bernie.

But the kangaroo suddenly reached into its pocket and pulled out a little kangaroo by its ears. This was strange enough but even stranger was that the little one, immediately after it touched the ground, started to grow very fast and, when it reached the size of the first one, pulled another little one out of its pocket. The process continued before the dumbfounded eyes of our three travelers until the plain till its horizon was full of kangaroos.

“Do you see?” howled Bernie. “That’s how the Universe behaves nowadays.”

“It can’t be general,” said Tom. “Suppose mice would carry on like this.”

“Stop it,” shouted Sophie who started to be slightly dizzy from this spectacle.

And, curiously enough, the kangaroos not only stopped their multiplication but started to disappear in the reversed order: a big animal shrank to a little one and hopped into the pocket of another kangaroo and so on. Before you could say “Connecticut”, there was again only one kangaroo in front of them.

“How do you do it?” asked Sophie.

“It’s a secret,” said the kangaroo. “Are you interested in tricks?”

“In one only,” said Tom. “How to get home the shortest way.”

“Oh, it’s a tricky one. Can you fly?”

All three shook their heads.

“Then you surely can turn yourself into a lizard.”

Again, they shook their heads.

“Then... wait a minute... you probably know at least six spells. No? And what about a magic stick, I mean of course third generation? Not even that? Well, then there is only one way: hop into my pocket.”

“Never!” exclaimed Tom.

“If it’s the only way to get home?” said Sophie.

“I want come home as a cat, not a kangaroo.”

“You should trust people more,” said Bernie.

“One could question even that,” said Tom. “But why should I trust a kangaroo?”

“Because you have no other possibility,” said the kangaroo.

So in the end all three hopped into the pocket, one after the other. There was dark inside and some strange noise, too, but suddenly they were out again – and guess where they

were? Yes, you are right: at the Travel Road, near the house where Sophie lived and was visited frequently by Tom.

“So we are happily home,” said Sophie. “But poor Bernie isn’t.”

“Why, I am at home, too. Don’t you see the house where I live?”

And really, there was this strange – not quite red and not quite brown – house with a patch of grass in front of it, some two hundred yards down the road. Curiously enough, Sophie never noticed either the house or Bernie before.

“Now I have a strange feeling,” said Sophie. “Did we go anywhere at all and did we get lost on the way?”

Neither Tom nor Bernie could answer that. There was only one thing they both agreed upon: they needed a very long and sound rest.

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Science Museum

You surely know what happened in the Science Museum. No? Nobody told you about the adventure with the big microscope? Well, sit still a moment, I have to recollect some of the details. My memory gets somewhat slower nowadays.

Usually, Sophie went to the Science Museum with Daddy. But that very day Daddy had a lot of work so Sophie went alone. Oh, not really alone, she went with Tom who was a tomcat, as you probably know, and quite a lazy one. Not that Tom was really interested in science but – such gossip was among some malicious mice – he was fond of candies. You don't see the connection? Well, many kids go to the Museum and they usually have some candies in their pockets. How these went to Tom, remains a mystery.

So Sophie and Tom went to the Museum. They wanted to take Bernie the dog along but Bernie was just quite melancholy about the state of the Universe and preferred a sound sleep to any unnecessary excitement. So they went without him.

“What about the entrance fee?” asked the man at the gate.

“I have a season ticket,” said Sophie.

“And this cat?”

“Cats don't pay,” said Tom.

“Wait a minute, I'll look it up,” said the man. “Let's see: adults, students, children, dogs, horses, penguins, seals... I don't see cats. Which means...”

“That cats don't pay,” said Tom and sneaked quickly in between his legs.

They entered a great hall where you could see models of space ships and, in the cupola, images of planets, stars and galaxies.

“They say here that it's like a window to the Universe,” said Sophie.

“Blast the Universe,” snarled Tom. “I am a practical cat. Let's go and look for some children.”

They found a bunch of kids who were supposed to admire a special exhibition of microscopes from the earliest ones up to the wonders of the present day. Actually they did not give much attention to the exhibits but were rather running about and fighting.

“You know what a microscope is?” asked Sophie Tom.

“Of course,” said Tom without hesitation.

“Just to be sure, what does it do?”

“Well, let me see... It surely does many things if you know how to run it.”

“The only thing I know,” said Sophie, “is that it's such a wonderful tube that makes something tiny placed below it look quite big from above.”

“I know. And it makes anything which is big above look tiny below,” said Tom.

“Well, I don't know,” said Sophie.

“Elementary logic,” said Tom.

She was not quite sure about it but, at that very moment, Tom pointed to a very big model of a microscope which was placed in the middle of the exhibition to catch the eye.

“Look at this big one over there,” he exclaimed.

“I think it's not real,” meant Sophie. “It's – how you call it, a dummy?”

“Never mind!”

In fact, he was rather interested in two boys chasing each other around the model. The first boy held a Mars stick, which he probably took from the other one and just at the moment when he caught Tom's attention he threw it into the aperture of the model. Faster than you could say Philadelphia, Tom was up the tube and into it. But, immediately, there came a muffled screech:

“Sophie, help! It's too deep and I am slipping!”

Sophie climbed the tube as fast as she could but she was only able to get hold of Tom's tail. Even worse, she also started to slip into the tube and, faster than you could say Boston, they both fell down. It did not hurt much but, dear me, what a strange world they saw around them! There were mountains of dust and huge cliffs which looked like being made of crumbled candy-wrappings.

"Look out," cried Sophie. "Here comes some train."

"I never saw anything like this," said Tom. "It looks like a huge caterpillar but..."

The creature stopped and looked at them.

"I am no stupid caterpillar, you dunce," it said sternly. "I am a centipede and you are lucky that I'm in a hurry, otherwise I would eat you."

"A centipede?" said Sophie. "I never heard such word."

"You are undereducated," said the creature. "It means that I am supposed to have a hundred of legs."

"Supposed? You don't know exactly?" asked Sophie.

"I always lose count. Could you count them for me? It could be practical to know."

"I can count to twenty. Maybe Tom..."

"Cats don't count," said Tom curtly. "I mean they count but they do not like to do any counting, especially of some stinking legs."

"Well, maybe I could try," said Sophie quickly. "One, two, three, four, five..."

And so on, you know the numbers. When Sophie came to twenty, she took hold of the centipede's leg.

"It's tickling," protested the centipede.

"Be steady," said Sophie. "There are much more left."

"Never mind, I'm in a hurry. I need new shoes and there is a sale next corner. Maybe another time."

She rushed on like a fast commuter train.

"Phooey, that was close," said Tom.

"You were not exactly tactful, talking about stinking legs," said Sophie. "She has so many of them."

"Have you heard about any cat being courteous to a centipede?"

"Didn't you notice?" said Sophie. "We are suddenly tiny, like some ants. It's better to be civil if you are so small."

At the same time, another horrible creature came near to them. It took Sophie a moment to recognize it as an ant but a huge one. In fact it was so huge that its mandibles were almost on the level of Sophie's breast.

"Are you food?" asked the ant.

"What makes you ask such a stupid question?" snarled Tom.

"I am new to the job," said the ant. "I haven't had a proper training yet. I was only told that there are two possibilities – either ant or food."

"You were misinformed," said Tom.

"I don't know. You are not ants, are you?"

"Do we look like some?" said Tom with irony.

"You could be in the middle of a transformation. If you are some larvae you have to report to our queen who will make proper ants out of you."

"I don't want to be an ant," cried Sophie.

"Why not? It's the only sensible way of existence. Anyway, if you don't want to enlist then we have to go back to the fundamentals: either ant or food."

The ant opened its mandibles but suddenly closed them and ran away. Four small mountains emerged quite near which Sophie recognized to be the shoes of two huge ogres.

“You see?” thundered one of them. “We have ants here. We must clear them out before they infest the whole museum. I have this spray, it should do the job.”

“Just a moment,” boomed the other ogre. “I see something interesting. Where are my tweezers... ah yes, here they are. Now let’s see...”

And, before you could say Minneapolis, he caught first Tom and then Sophie with his tweezers a put them into a small box in his huge hand. He took them to his table behind the exhibition.

“Interesting, interesting,” he murmured thunderously. “I need my magnifying glass... why on earth have I to spend my precious time by looking for anything I need... somebody stole it for sure, it’s really the limit... ah, here it is. Now, let’s see.”

A huge magnifying glass emerged above Sophie and Tom.

“Unbelievable,” thundered the ogre. “An insect in the form of a cat and another one looking like a little girl!”

“We are no insects!” shouted Sophie and Tom but their voices were as weak as their bodies were tiny so that the man did not hear them.

“It’s a revolution in evolution,” shouted the man so that Sophie and Tom jumped in their box. “I’ll be famous, I’ll get five Nobel prizes and a hundred honorary doctorates and maybe a small rise in salary. But wait, these little ones could somehow run away or die or something and nobody will believe me... Better to put them into a preserving solution. Now, let me see, where are the chemicals...”

“Quick,” cried Tom when the man went away. “We have to run.”

Tom was the first to jump out of the box a he lent his tail to Sophie for once so that she was able to climb out of the box, too. However, they were on the table which was staggeringly high for them. They looked with horror into the abyss below them but, at the same time, thought with even more horror about the man with his tweezers and his chemicals.

“Look, there is some rope hanging down over there,” exclaimed Tom. “We are saved.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Sophie.

She never climbed down such a rope. But urgent need teaches you many things. Almost breathless, Sophie started to glide down.

“Are you OK?” shouted Tom below her.

“So far...”

I cannot describe you the feelings of our Sophie during the long glide into the horrendous depth. At last, the ground was under her feet.

“We are saved,” jubilated Tom.

“That’s what you think,” smiled a huge spider, whose thread Tom took for a rope, and lowered himself slowly after them.

Of course, the spider expected them to remain glued to his thread like other insects usually did. But the thread was not sticky enough because of his diet: he became fond of blueberries lately and ate definitely too much of them. When the spider saw that his prospective morsels jumped off his thread and ran away, he was furious. He parachuted to the ground and started chasing them. Do you think they had much chance? Sophie had two legs, Tom had four but the spider had eight of them! Sophie had two eyes, Tom had two, which makes four, but the spider had twenty! So their chances were meager.

However, they were lucky again. The spider met the centipede who was quite furious because of her mishap at the shoe sale. The price was low, it seemed to be a bargain. However, when she already bought fifty shoes, the beetle working as shop-assistant told her that they are sold out. No, they definitely cannot take the purchased shoes back, what is bought is bought. Now what do you do with fifty shoes if you have a hundred legs? The centipede tried to put them on the left row of legs but, of course, she was limping. Do you

imagine what a limp it was with fifty legs? Then she tried to put them intermittently left, right, left, right and so on – but she had a wobbly pace! So she was furious.

“What are you doing in my territory?” she shouted to the spider.

“It’s just a friendly visit,” said the spider.

“Do you think I was born yesterday?” said the centipede.

“I am after those two,” conceded the spider. “I will just friendly eat them and then return to my home above.”

“How do you mean, just friendly eat them? They are mine!”

“Couldn’t we negotiate?” said the spider. “Suppose you eat the two-legged creature and I the four-legged one.”

“No deal. I happen to like legs. I want the four-legged one.”

I don’t know how long they continued they haggle, it’s quite possible that they are still at it. In the meantime, Sophie with Tom looked for the way to the microscope dummy. It was a very long walk partly because they didn’t know the direction. Sophie knew that for example the north-side of the trees should have more lichen, but nobody taught her how to find the microscope-side in a museum. But believe me or not, they found their way eventually. And, to make things even better, they found the Mars stick which was the origin of all their trouble. Miraculously, it had its normal size in contrast to Sophie and Tom. So when Tom made his way through the wrapping, he could stuff himself full with his beloved sweet.

“You made yourself sticky all over,” said Sophie. “I’ll have to bathe you when we come home.”

“No water, please,” said Tom. “I am a dry-cleaning cat. Besides, my stickiness can come handy yet.”

Really, he suddenly could climb up the tube of the microscope and even help Sophie to do the same. And when they came out of the upper hole, believe me or not, they were suddenly their right size again.

“You little girl with that chocolate cat,” shouted a warden from a distance. “What are you doing there?”

“We are not doing anything,” said Sophie.

“Stop it immediately and come to the exit,” said the warden. “It’s closing time.”

Sophie didn’t quite know how to stop doing nothing but went without protest with Tom to the exit.

“I am no chocolate cat,” grumbled Tom on the way.

“But you are smeared with chocolate all over,” said Sophie.

“I am looking forward to lick it off,” said Tom.

They went through the gate and saw with surprise that it was already dark outside.

So this is what I remember about their adventure in Science Museum. If you find anything strange in it, it could be due to my bad memory.

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Wish-Kaleidoscope

So you like kaleidoscopes, those tubes which give you a different image whenever you turn them? These little things are quite cute, I liked to play with them in my days. But I bet you haven't heard about the wish-kaleidoscope Sophie with Tom and Bernie had such a weird experience with. Yes, I am going to tell you but before that I have to refresh your memory. Sophie was a little girl who lived in the town named Annie Tree and had two friends, a tomcat Tom and a Saint Bernardine dog Bernie. You already know that? So you also know that both Tom and Bernie were frightfully lazy. It took a lot of persuasion to make them do anything.

"Get up, you lazybones," said Sophie to them very loudly. "There is a fair brewing up in the town."

"Fairs are not brewed," grumbled Tom.

"And it's not fair to wake me up," whined Bernie. "I had such a beautiful dream about a bone."

"How do you mean it's not fair. It's a fair, I tell you," said Sophie. "Or it will be tomorrow."

"Then we have a lot of time for a little nap," said Tom closing his eyes.

"But the preparations are in full swing," insisted Sophie. "The great magician Popocatepetl is coming. Wouldn't you like to know how he makes his tricks?"

Bernie opened one of his eyes.

"Did you say Popo..." he said.

"Yes, Popocatepetl," said Sophie. "The greatest magician of the Lumumbo island."

"I never heard of such an island," growled Tom. "How many people live on it?"

"They say one man only, Popocatepetl himself," said Sophie. "But this doesn't prevent him to be the greatest magician. Come, let's have a look at his gadgets. They could be interesting."

They reluctantly stood up and stretched their backs. It took quite a long time in the case of Bernie because he was a really big dog and you cannot stretch a long body in a jiffy. Then all three of them went down to downtown. You cannot go up to downtown, can you. Anyway, they came to the place where the fairs usually took place... What? You say if somebody takes the place then no place is left? Well, I don't know. There definitely was a place there and a large sign fastened to two trees said FAIR.

"See?" said Sophie. "I told you."

"It could mean a lot of things," grumbled Tom.

"I think it means what it says," said Sophie. "Let's go and look for Popocatepetl."

They strolled between booths in various stages of construction and decorating till they came to a rather weird place in the back corner of the square. Some men on stepladders were already fastening big cardboards with large red letters to a wire. They already had "POPO" hanging but a man on the ground was handing them another "PO" and a second man was just coming with still another "PO".

"It looks like stuttering," said Sophie.

"Stop the POs," shouted a man from the stepladder. "We need a CAT."

"I am not available," said Tom. "I have better things to do than to hang on a wire."

But nobody understood what he said except Sophie and Bernie – it was a mere "Meow" for the others which they did not even notice.

"You little girl with the animals," shouted the man on the stepladder. "Go somewhere else, there is a serious work to be done here."

"Don't you think this man is a bit po-ponderous or even popo-ponderous?" said Tom.

"He certainly is not interesting," said Sophie. "Let's go further."

Bernie did not say anything. He was distressed by the many POs he had seen and he imagined how they could multiply further like the kangaroos in one of their earlier adventures. The Universe certainly was not in a good state, he thought.

In the meantime, they came to a wooden old shack with an almost unreadable red inscription POPOCATEPETL on its wall. Behind the shack there was a large barrel lying on its side on some weird system of levers and wheels. Faint letters on its side said WISH-KALEIDOSCOPE. Actually, one could not be quite sure about the SCOPE – it could be SLOPE or even SNOPE but that wouldn't mean anything.

“The great magician does not seem to be very prosperous,” said Tom.

Really, everything here was looking so old and worn down that one expected it to fall apart the next moment.

“That could be his ploy,” said Sophie. “Nobody expects anything from him and then hey-presto...”

“I don't know about hey,” grumbled Tom. “But I certainly don't believe any presto.”

“Look,” exclaimed Sophie pointing to an inscription on a small door in the flat side of the barrel. “It says ENTER AND WISH.”

“You needn't buy every appeal,” said Tom. “Think of the commercials.”

“Don't be such a bore,” said Sophie. “Anyway, I am going inside. You both can wait outside if you are afraid.”

She opened the small door and climbed in. Reluctantly, both Tom and Bernie squeezed in after her. Neither of them was very keen to try out the magician's powers but they didn't want to be called yellow-bellies although Tom's belly had a golden hue and there was a bit of yellowish dirt on Bernie's white belly, too.

Inside, it looked like an old rusty barrel. However, there was a sign on the curved wall saying: 1. wish and 2. press the lever. An arrow pointed to a rather primitive lever below it. Now, Sophie was keen to try it out but somehow she could not think about any urgent wish.

“Do you wish something?” she asked Tom and Bernie.

They shook their heads. Frankly, they were not feeling very free in the barrel.

“Never mind,” said Sophie. “Just for fun, I wish some blueberries.”

And she pressed the lever. With a screeching noise, the barrel turned with them a bit and then a door opened in the opposite flat side. They keenly peeped out.

“Could you believe it?” said Sophie and climbed out of the door.

The landscape they entered was quite different from the dirty corner of the square where Popocatepetl's shack was: there was a green hill before them with dense blueberry bushes tall like trees with an amazing lot of blueberries hanging from them. I say blueberries but you have to imagine blue balls of the size of a melon. They were everywhere you looked. Sophie would have liked to try one but she was not sure how to do it. Suddenly, a strange creature appeared on the narrow path between the bushes. It seemed to be made from a number of blueberries, starting with the round blue head on which it had a rather weird golden crown.

“Welcome,” the creature said. “This is the kingdom of Blueberry Hill and I am the Blueberry Queen. Everybody who likes blueberries is kindly received here. You wished blueberries, so have some.”

At the same moment, bang, splash, plop, the huge blueberries started to fall down from the trees on their heads. It did not really hurt but they were soon covered with the red blueberry juice, they were almost drowning in it and could not see because of the huge rags of the blue skin of the berries.

“Help,” shouted all three of them and ran back to the door of the barrel.

“That was close,” said Tom inside when the door banged after them and licked ferociously the remnants of the juice from his fur.

“Maybe it was not the right wish,” said Sophie.

“I certainly don’t understand how anybody can like blueberries,” grumbled Tom.

“They are quite tasty,” said Sophie. “But it was rather too much of a good thing.”

Bernie was not saying anything. He looked through a blueberry skin which still stuck to his eyes. Everything he saw had a blue color. No wonder that he was in a blue mood.

“You should try a better wish if you have one,” said Sophie to Tom.

“Well, I could do with some candy,” said Tom.

“You have to press the lever,” reminded him Sophie.

Reluctantly and very cautiously, Tom neared his paw to the lever. The very moment he touched it, the barrel turned a bit and the door sprang open again. The three friends looked out.

“Everything is blue,” said Bernie with sorrow.

“Clear your eyes, man,” said Tom and tore the shuck from Bernie’s head. “This is the best landscape I have seen in years.”

Really, when the three of them came out, they were seeing a small hill made of ice cream and various kinds of exquisite sherbet. On it there were trees made of candied fruit with various sweets hanging from their branches. There were rocks of various kinds of chocolate and many other sweet things I could not even name.

“Um, exquisite,” said Tom licking one rock. “Best kind of chocolate I have tasted in years.”

“Yes, very tasty,” said Sophie helping herself to some sherbet.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Bernie. “Isn’t it somewhat too sweet? And also cold, with all this ice cream around? I shouldn’t mind ice and snow as a St. Bernardine dog but I am out of training, you know.”

“We can go up there,” said Sophie pointing to a sugar cliff. “There’s no ice there and the sun is shining, we can warm up there.”

But it was not easy to climb up the ice cream slope. It was slippery and also sticky. Puddles of melted ice cream formed around their feet and soon all three were shivering with cold, in particular Tom whose body was almost covered with sweet ice. But, after some falls and slipping back, they eventually reached the shiny sugar rock.

“That’s better,” said Bernie making himself comfortable on the warm rock.

Both Sophie and Tom sat down on his side.

“Only,” said Bernie after a while, “I have such a weird taste in my mouth. Too much sweet, I reckon.”

“Yes, I have it too,” said Sophie. “I could do with something sour.”

“Or a smoked fish,” said Tom. “I like sweets but one shouldn’t overdo it.”

At this very moment, a weird creature apparently made of chocolate and various candies appeared on the slope above them. It had a fudge head and a crown of crystallized sugar on it.

“I am the Queen of Candies,” it said. “Welcome to my Sweet Kingdom. You wished some sweet, so help yourself.”

At the same moment, a snow-slip of ice cream rushed to them from above accompanied by an avalanche of big sweet drops and various other candies.

“Ouch,” cried Tom who was hit by some droplet.

“Stop it,” shouted Sophie. “We had enough!”

“We have to run,” cried Bernie seeing a mountain of milk chocolate nearing them.

However, they found that they were glued to the sugar they were sitting on and thus could not stand up.

“We are lost,” cried Bernie and big tears rushed from his melancholy eyes making puddles around them.

This was fortunate because the humidity dissolved the sugar gluing them to the rock. They were free! Slipping and falling and tumbling, they ran down the ice cream slope.

“Uff,” said Tom when the door of the barrel banged after them. “That was close again. I’ll never eat anything sweet in my life. And I’ll never wish anything either.”

“Never say never,” said Sophie. “You’ll end up wishing not to wish. Maybe it needs some practice. Bernie, it’s your turn.”

“I wish just a bone,” said Bernie and put resignedly his paw on the lever.

The barrel turned a bit again and the door sprang open. They went outside and what they were seeing now was really staggering: a landscape made entirely of bones. There were trees consisting of bones and a hut on a hill built of bones and a bone bridge over a ravine full of bones.

“Well, um, that’s very good,” said Bernie. “But I didn’t wish so much.”

Just at the moment he was saying this, a frightful creature looking like a dinosaur skeleton appeared on a hill.

“This is the Bone Kingdom,” it roared. “And I am its king. You wished some bones so have them.”

Immediately, bones started to rain on them from everywhere.

“Ouch,” cried Tom. “Thank you very much but don’t overdo it.”

Soon, they had to run back into the barrel and out of it again through the other door.

“Wish, wish, wish,” teased them a bird on a tree.

“You scoundrel,” shouted Tom. “I am going to teach you a lesson.”

“Not me,” said the bird. “I have an appointment in the town.”

And it flew away.

Somewhat subdued, the three friends went back to their homes.

“What was wrong?” asked Sophie on the way.

“Too much of the good thing,” said Bernie.

And they all agreed on that.

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Bookstore

Sophie went to the bookstore usually with Mom and Dad but once she went there with Tom. The reason was that she wanted to show Tom some books with cats. Tom did not believe that any cat would stay in a book.

“I can imagine a cat in a garden,” he said, “or in a house, preferably in the kitchen or on a sofa. This is reasonable. But never in a book.”

“But I tell you,” insisted Sophie. “There are many books full of cats.”

“What would they do there?” grumbled Tom. “Cats do not read. Not that they couldn’t but they have better things to do.”

Sophie knew that Tom was very opinionated and could be stubborn like a mule. He believed only what he saw with his own eyes. Thus the only possibility was to show him which meant to take him to a bookstore. But she knew there could be problems: cats are not supposed to go to a bookstore.

“We could put glasses on your nose,” she speculated.

“Why on earth should I wear glasses?” asked Tom.

“To make you look more intelligent,” said Sophie.

“What a preposterous idea!” snarled Tom. “So you think cats are not intelligent enough? You are full of prejudices. This is twenty first century, you know.”

Sophie saw that Tom took offence and she was sorry.

“You are the most intelligent cat I have seen in my life,” she said. “It’s only because of the shop assistants. They can be crass, you know. But never mind, let’s try.”

So they went to the bookstore. When they came to it, they saw a lot of people inside but also an elephant, a camel and even a large penguin.

“So I see a penguin is intelligent enough,” said Tom with irony. “Even a camel is, but not an educated, well-groomed cat.”

Evidently, Tom was still offended. He was vain a little, I have to admit.

“I think these are actually people in animal costumes,” said Sophie. “There is some celebration or something going on in the store. Let’s go inside.”

So they went through the entrance.

“What about this cat?” stopped them a shop assistant.

“This is my friend Tom,” said Sophie.

“Ah, I see, disguised as a cat,” laughed the man. “Very funny.”

And he let them through.

They had to take a lift because the staircase was full of people.

“Now, let me see,” said Sophie when they came to the first story. “The cat books should be over there. But they changed it again, we have to look for them.”

They went along the bookshelves and Sophie looked at the books. She stopped before a large illustrated book for children standing open on the floor. She was looking at a picture showing a little girl with a cat on a path through a beautiful park.

“Well, this is not exactly what I meant,” she said. “But, you see, there is a cat here.”

Tom looked distrustfully at the picture.

“Don’t you find something strange in this scene?” he asked.

“Yes, I seem to know this girl,” she said. “And even the cat.”

At that very moment, the picture stopped being flat and changed into a real scene: you could step on the sandy path and even feel the fragrance of the flowers in the park.

“Won’t you come and play with me?” said the girl in the book.

“Why not,” said Sophie and stepped on the sand. “I am Sophie and this very intelligent cat with me is called Tom.”

“I am Eifos,” said the girl. “Actually, it’s written Eihpos.”

“What a weird name,” said Sophie.

“Yes, I know,” said the girl. “But you get used to it. And this very wise tomcat here is called Mot.”

“How do you do,” said Tom to Mot in a civil manner. “Hot a bit, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes,” answered Mot in the same way. “Rather humid, isn’t it?”

“This must be due to the rising temperature of the Atlantic,” said Tom.

“Not speaking about the low pressure over Canada,” added Mot.

Both cats were being very civil but you could tell from their swinging tails and arching backs that they would like to swoop on each other.

“Look mother,” a boy’s voice came from outer space. “There are suddenly two girls and two cats here.”

“You need glasses, I told you,” some woman said. “Let’s go, we are already late.”

“Come along,” said Eifos. “We got stuck while these cats were exchanging weather reports.”

“Where are we going?” asked Sophie.

“First to our garden and then to our house,” said Eifos. “It’s on the next page. Normally, we should wait till somebody turns the page but I know a shortcut.”

“Not again!” cried Tom.

“You also have bad experience with shortcuts?” asked Mot. “I always try to make Eifos see reason but it’s futile.”

In spite of these skeptical remarks, they suddenly came to a garden which seemed weirdly familiar to Sophie. One would almost say it was at home... But no, everything was somehow different, for example the big tree, which they had on the left side at home, was on the right. It was not the same tree, or was it?

“Let’s play ball,” said Eifos.

“OK,” said Sophie. “But there are only two of us.”

Cats do not play ball. Not that they couldn’t, as Tom would put it, but they have better things to do – for example to take a little nap on the wooden veranda in front of the house. Mot must have been of the same opinion. They lied down on the left and right side of the porch and closed their eyes.

Eifos took a big many-colored ball from the grass and threw it to Sophie. But somehow, as if by its own will, the ball changed its direction and flew somewhere else.

“Never mind,” said Sophie.

She ran after the ball, lifted it up and threw it to Eifos. But the same thing happened again: the ball, flying first in the direction of Eifos, changed its direction and flew somewhere else.

“This is weird,” said Sophie. “I am usually good at throwing.”

“So am I,” retorted Eifos. “There seems to be some wind in the garden. But it shouldn’t. Wind comes on page twenty three.”

“And where are we?” asked Sophie.

“Let’s see... We met at the page seven and this is the next one,” said Eifos. “So page eight.”

“That should be far enough,” said Sophie. “But we cannot play here. At least, I cannot, with this ball having its own spiteful will.”

“OK,” said Eifos. “Let’s go inside.”

And she walked in a direction opposite to where the entrance was.

“Aren’t you going into the house?” asked Sophie.

“Yes. But the inside of the house is two pages from here,” said Eifos. “Mot, let’s go.”

Mot and Tom reluctantly opened their eyes and stretched their legs.

“Little girls are very unsteady,” said Mot.

“Yes, they keep disturbing one’s serious thinking,” agreed Tom.

They all went down a narrow path which seemed to lead nowhere but, suddenly, they somehow came into the house.

“You would not like to play with a doll, would you,” asked Eifos.

“No,” said Sophie.

“I thought so. We can play with a building set,” said Eifos and opened a big box.

It was exactly the same building set Sophie had but those parts which were green at home were red here and vice versa. While the cats lied down to do more serious thinking, the girls started to play together. But the parts Sophie wanted to add to anything Eifos started somehow did not connect and the same happened to Eifos when she tried to continue Sophie’s building. In the end, they played side by side. And, amazingly, they built exactly the same house, only that of Sophie was mostly red and that of Eifos was mostly green.

Suddenly, there was dark in the house.

“What’s up?” shouted Sophie.

“Somebody closed the book,” said Eifos.

“What are we going to do? I don’t see a thing,” said Sophie.

“I’m going to switch the light on,” said Eifos. “We are not supposed to do that but nobody can see what we are doing when the book is closed.”

She fumbled about in the dark and then switched the light on.

“That’s better,” said Sophie. “So what are we going to do now?”

“I think we could have some refreshment,” said Eifos.

She went to the kitchen and brought milk and cookies for all four of them – except the milk for the girls was in glasses and that for the cats was in china bowls. Both cats made a break in their serious thinking and helped themselves to the milk and cookies.

“Needing some energy after all this thinking,” said Tom between two helpings.

“Rather,” answered Mot. “Brain work sort of drains you.”

After the refreshment the cats went back to their serious thinking and the girls wanted to start their play again when, suddenly, something shook the whole house. The lights went out. In the dark, the violent shaking seemed even more horrible.

“What’s this?” asked Sophie anxiously.

“It’s only the dragon,” said Eifos.

“What? A dragon here?”

“Yes, a male one. Some child forgot a picture of him between the pages some time ago and now he keeps pestering us,” explained Eifos.

“Is he dangerous?” asked Sophie with some apprehension.

“Well, I would say that he cannot harm you when he doesn’t belong to the book,” said Eifos. “But, as you see, he can shake the whole house so he probably could shake you, too.”

“I would better not try it,” said Sophie. “Actually, I think it’s time for me and Tom to return home.”

“It could be difficult when the book is closed,” said Eifos.

“What are we going to do?” cried Sophie.

Luckily, the light went on the next moment, as if day time returned.

“Quick,” said Eifos. “Somebody opened the book again. Come, Mot and Tom.”

Both cats stretched their feet grumbling that there is not a moment of quiet for serious thinking in this house.

Eifos led them on a path which she claimed to be a shortcut to page seven. But soon they started to dash against big black letters.

“Sssssssss,” said one of them to Sophie. “I’m a snake and I’m going to catch you.”

“Let me alone,” said Sophie anxiously. “I know you, you are the letter S.”

“I seem to have lost my way,” said Eifos.

“Typical,” said Mot. “When did you still have it?”

“Just a moment ago,” said Eifos.

“Then look around. Nobody stole it, I hope,” growled Mot.

“Here it is,” exclaimed Eifos victoriously. “Follow me.”

And really, they came to the familiar park with the sandy path.

“Just step outside over there,” suggested Eifos to Sophie.

Sophie wanted to shake hands with her but she somehow could not reach her hand. So she merely smiled and went with Tom to the place where they entered the book.

“Look, mom,” cried a boy. “A girl with a cat is coming out of the book!”

“This boy has such a lively imagination,” said his mother to another woman.

Sophie with Tom stepped out of the page. The little boy looked at them with an open mouth.

“Let’s get lost,” said Sophie.

“Again?” exclaimed Tom.

“I mean let’s go home,” said Sophie.

And home they went. They were already near their house when Sophie stopped in her tracks.

“I forgot to show you the cat books,” she said.

“Another time,” said Tom.

It was high time for some really serious thinking about all this, he thought. He found a warm place on the porch and closed his eyes.

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Mermaid

You surely know how Sophie met a mermaid. No? Nobody told you? Well it is supposed to be a secret but if you say “cross my heart” and “seal my lips” I am going to tell you. It started quietly enough.

“I wan to be a mermaid,” said Sophie one afternoon.

She was drawing something with a crayon on a peace of paper while the tomcat Tom, lying near to her on a warm porch, was having a little nap.

“What do you want to be made of?” he asked opening one eye.

“What’s wrong with your ears?” said Sophie. “Not made but maid. A mermaid, half girl half fish.”

“Which part which?”

“Girl the upper one,” said Sophie.

“What relief. But even so, how would you walk?”

“It’s about swimming, not walking. Have you ever tried to swim?”

“What a rude question!” Tom growled. “Cats don’t swim, you already know it.”

“OK. But girls do, at least they try. I would like to swim more gracefully. If I could turn myself into a mermaid I would swim like a seal. I saw them in a zoo.”

“It could make sense in water,” said Tom with a shudder. “But you have to come out of it again, don’t you? Have you ever seen a seal out of water? They don’t even crawl.”

“Then I have to find two tricks: one to turn myself into a mermaid and the other to turn out of it again.”

Tom mumbled something about silly girls and went back to his favorite occupation, namely dreaming in the sun. What he dreamed of, we don’t know because he always said afterwards that he was thinking about serious things.

But it was not only Tom who was thinking. Sophie never gave up her plans easily, however strange they could appear to anybody else. After some pondering, she went to the garage and came back with a large plastic bag, a scotch tape, some glue, scissors and some other things I don’t remember. While Tom was thinking a quite long thought, Sophie was working very hard. After several wrong starts, she eventually managed to make a sort of sack somewhat similar to the skin of a large fish. Mind you, it had even some fins and scales although the latter ones, I have to admit, were only painted on the sack.

“That could do,” she said. “Tom, would you like to come with me?”

“Come with you?” Tom answered dreamily. “Where to?”

“To some water. I want to try this out.”

“Some water?” said Tom with distaste. “No, sorry, I am somewhat busy just now.”

“You are a slacker, that’s what you are. OK, if you don’t want to go with me, I have to ask Bernie. I don’t like to walk alone.”

“You can try. Hopefully the Universe is not expanding too fast for him at the moment,” said Tom with some malice and closed his eyes again.

So Sophie went with her fish skin to the nearby house. It was not difficult to find Bernie: first, he was a very big dog, and second, he was sleeping as usual on the porch.

“Hi, Bernie,” Sophie said.

“What’s up?” Bernie answered and opened one eye. “What is that strange thing you are dragging?”

“That’s an experiment,” Sophie explained. “I need water for it. Do you know about some water around?”

“Well, there is a bowl I drink from and there is also a barrel behind the house.”

“I don’t mean that,” said Sophie impatiently. “I mean a pond or pool or lake or something.”

“Well, there is a dam nearby,” said Bernie hesitantly.

“I am not supposed to go to the dam,” Sophie retorted. “I go there with Daddy but that’s different.”

“Then there is a swimming pool not far from here. But dogs are not allowed to go inside and I’m afraid they would not be happy about this strange thing you call an experiment either.”

“So you cannot help me?” asked Sophie with sorrow.

“Well, I know about a secret pond nearby. It’s on a private land, nobody is supposed to go there, let alone to swim in it. But I have never seen anybody there, so it should be safe. I only doubt that anybody takes care of the water cleanness.”

“I am not going to drink it,” said Sophie. “Let’s go there.”

Bernie stretched his legs, then the whole body, then he made a long, one minute yawn, after which he was ready. They walked on a narrow path between dense shrubs, then through a small wood and again into some bushes. Then, suddenly, a mysteriously looking pond surrounded by shrubs and trees was before them. The water had a greenish color but seemed to be quite clear.

“Everything is so quiet here,” said Sophie with some apprehension.

“As I said, nobody seems to come here except some raccoons and beavers but they all clear off when they see me.”

“Would you swim with me?” asked Sophie.

“Er, dogs don’t swim without purpose, you know,” said Bernie. “You throw me a stick into the water and I will gladly bring it to you. But otherwise...”

“Lazybones,” said Sophie. “But you will wait for me and guard the place, will you?”

“Of course, that’s what dogs are here for.”

Sophie sat at the shore of the pond, put on her “fish skin” and slipped into the water. She made several hasty strokes but her sack flapped about her legs and hindered her motions. She nearly gave up her experiment when she heard a voice somewhere nearby.

“You have to say Ullumbullu.”

Sophie looked around but nobody was there except Bernie who was soundly asleep on the shore. That’s guarding for you, she thought.

“Why should I say it?” she asked.

“It’s the password into the underwater world.”

“OK. Ullumbullu!”

At the same moment, believe it or not, the plastic of the sack turned into a real fish skin and stuck to her body so that she could move even the fins. She found herself swimming gracefully up and down like a dolphin or a seal. Moreover, she suddenly saw an amazing creature swimming on her side in perfect synchrony with her movements. She had beautiful golden hair, a handsome face with big blue-green eyes and a well-formed body down to her navel. The rest of her body was like that of a fish, only much larger and graceful. The scales on it glittered like golden leaves or little gems.

“Who are you?” asked Sophie.

“An undine,” said the creature. “You can also say a water-nymph.”

“Not a mermaid?” wondered Sophie.

“I am nobody’s maid,” said the undine tartly. “Let alone a mere maid.”

“But I thought...” began Sophie.

“The mermaids are said to live in a sea,” explained the undine. “This here is a pond, you know, but an enchanted one. You will see, we only have to swim more into the deep.”

“But I cannot hold my breath for long,” said Sophie with anxiety. “And I have no gills like fish have.”

“Don’t worry,” said the undine. “There’s a spider supplying air from the surface. He sells bags of it, you will see.”

And really, in a short while they came to a small underwater hut with a sign saying “FRESH AIR FOR SALE. ONE PREMIUM BUBBLE FOR...”

but the price was difficult to read. Sophie saw small spiders climbing up and down on glittering threads and carrying small bags with air. In the entrance of the hut there was a much bigger and uglier spider smiling as much as he could with his mandibles.

“Two beautiful undines,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“We need two Premium Bubbles,” said the undine. “Are they really fresh?”

“What do you take me for? Fresh as a spring morning. Or as your complexion.”

“What’s the price?”

“A golden scale each,” said the spider.

“It’s twice as much than last time!”

“What can I do?” waved the spider all his eight legs. “There’s recession and inflation, not speaking about global warming. And I am short of manpower. And...”

“Don’t tell me it’s less air outside,” said the undine with contempt.

She peeled two golden scales off her body and gave them to the spider. Then she took the two large bubbles from him and handed one to Sophie. It was wrapped in a very fine film and had a thin tube from which air could be sucked like a cola from a tin.

“That old racketeer,” she said. “He asks more every time. Such way I’ll be plucked in no time. I’ll be sleek like an eel.”

“Don’t talk so loud,” whispered Sophie. “He can hear you.”

“He’s used to it. And he minds his gold only. Now, let’s swim to our king, his majesty Water Sprite. I have to warn you, he likes to disguise himself as a catfish. But don’t be afraid of him, he has a heart of gold really.”

They swam to a corner of the pond which was in the shade of a very old willow and then deep into a cave under the shore. There, amidst some strange luminescent underwater plants, they saw a throne made of jade or some similar precious stone. On it, in a comfortable position, a rather formidable monster was lying. Yes, it was a catfish all right, but a huge and very old one. He had a golden crown on his flat head and long silver whiskers hanging from the corners of his big mouth. Sophie found him rather ugly and terrifying but then she noticed a benevolent twinkle in his eyes and was afraid no longer.

“Ah, my favorite undine,” said the Water Sprite. “Bringing a nice visitor as I see. Are you a little nymph, too?”

“I am a girl really,” said Sophie.

“She came from the outer world,” explained the undine. “She wanted to try out how it feels to be a mermaid.”

“Ah yes, our salty cousins in the see,” laughed the king. “How do you like it here?”

“It’s wonderful,” said Sophie.

“You like my looks?” asked the catfish with a twinkle in his eyes.

“I like your golden crown and your silver whiskers,” said Sophie hesitantly.

“That’s all? What about my classical nose or the sensitive curve of my lips?”

“Well,” said Sophie. “Maybe if I get used to you...”

“What? You don’t find me beautiful from the first sight? Undine, show me a mirror.”

The undine quickly fetched a large shell from behind the throne and held it as a mirror up to him.

“Yes, you are right,” said the king somewhat morosely. “I am rather ugly in this disguise. But I have to, you know. It’s more important for a ruler to be frightening than to be admired.”

“I don’t know,” said Sophie doubtfully. “It seems to be the other way round in the outside world.”

“At least, you are frank and I like you,” said the king. “Here, take this as a keepsake.”

He handed her a small pearl on a shell which Sophie took gratefully.

“And now, dash back, I have some important things to do.”

Thus Sophie with the undine swam back to the surface and then to the shore. But there were two fat men with fishing rods and nets on it.

“Look,” shouted one of them. “What a big fish!”

“I am no fish,” cried Sophie. “I am a girl!”

“It’s too big for a fishing rod or even a net,” shouted the man, not hearing her. “I’ll use a harpoon, that’s what I’m going to do.”

“I don’t want to be harpooned,” cried Sophie. “If only I could get rid of this skin...”

“You must say “Hallamballa”,” said the undine in haste. “Good by and come again.”

And she dived into the water and was not seen again.

“Hallamballa,” said Sophie and lo, the fish skin turned back into a plastic bag which quietly slipped off her feet and disappeared in water.

“See? I am a girl, not a fish,” said Sophie climbing out of water.

“And you were swimming here where it’s strictly forbidden?” shouted the man.

He was disappointed by the disappearance of his big catch and thus very angry. He caught Sophie by her arm and shook her roughly.

“We are going to fine you,” he shouted, “and put you into our private jail where you will stay on bread and water or even better without any bread or water till doomsday.”

“I don’t think so,” said Sophie without fear. “Bernie, come here.”

Bernie awoke from his light sleep, stretched his feet and looked at the men with interest. When the man looked at the huge dog, he loosened his grip and let Sophie go.

“Well, I will be merciful this time,” he said. “But don’t come here again.”

“Come, Bernie,” said Sophie without looking back.

So they went back along the same path and soon they parted at Bernie’s home.

“So how was the mermaid business?” asked Tom lazily when Sophie came home.

“Fine. I met a catfish,” said Sophie.

“A catfish?” exclaimed Tom. “What an oxymoron! The only connection between a cat and a fish I can imagine is that the cat eats the fish, preferably mildly smoked.”

He licked his lips imagining it.

“But I met a catfish, whatever you say. And he gave me a pearl.”

She showed him a small pearl she had been holding in her fist up to this moment.

“What’s it for? Can you eat it?” asked Tom.

“It’s not for eating, silly! It’s beautiful.”

“Really?”

He went back to the porch to give some serious thinking to the strange notion of beauty some little girls have.

Well, that’s all. Sophie lost the pearl after some time, I am sorry to say, so that there is no evidence left that these things really happened. Sophie learned to swim quite well when she grew a bit, though never as well as a seal or a mermaid. Later on, somebody told her that no mermaids or undines exist. So what about the little pearl the Water Sprite gave her? Oh yes, it was lost, so you have to make your own mind about it.

- - -

The mighty king

Have I told you what happened to Sophie and Tom when they went to the bookstore? No, I don't mean that weird experience with a book. They went to that bookstore several more times. The shop attendants gradually got used to this strange habit of Sophie's friend to go about disguised as a cat so that they could enter without any problem.

Tom was especially lazy that day I am talking about.

"Let's use the lift," he said.

"It's only a few steps to the first floor," Sophie objected. "And the lift is so slow."

"We are in no rush," said Tom. "And I am kind of tired."

"You mean lazy. But never mind."

So they entered the lift which was quite empty this time. The door closed after them but that was all: the lift stood still.

"We have to push the button, I think," said Sophie.

"There are two of them," said Tom.

"Yes. The one with zero means ground floor where we are now. The other one must mean the first floor. But it is too high, I cannot reach it. Could you try?"

Tom never admitted that there is anything he couldn't do. But one glance only told him that any of the numerous cat tricks he knew were useless in this case: the button was placed simply too high for him to reach it.

"I think it is not the right button," he said tartly. "Look, there is another one here, quite low. This is the one meant for cats and little girls, I think."

Sophie looked at the button in the corner of the cabin which she never noticed before. It had a red color and was covered with a piece of scotch tape. Some very faint inscription written with a pencil above it said something like "No use" or "Don't use".

"Well, I don't know," she said. "Somebody wrote here not to use it."

"People scribble all kind of things in public places," growled Tom. "Some nonsense, usually. Let's simply try it."

And he pushed the button with his paw and, immediately, the cabin started to move. Well, you cannot really see the movement, can you. But you can feel it somehow. And Sophie with Tom were feeling not only that the cabin moved but that it accelerated to a crazy speed, leaving probably not only the first floor but even the roof of the building behind. You ask me how? Well, I am no elevator specialist and I was not in the cabin. I have it from hearsay, the chipmunks chattered about it all over Annie Tree for a long time. They are usually well informed.

Luckily, the elevator stopped eventually. Actually, it did so in such an abrupt way that both Sophie and Tom jumped. The door opened showing a weird man who looked like he was expecting them. He was almost bald with wild tufts of reddish hair above each ear and a rather comic little shining cone on the crown of his head.

"So, you were ordered to come here," the man said.

"We only pushed the button," Sophie answered.

"As you were ordered," he said with a nod, scribbling something into his notepad. "Your names, please?"

"I am Sophie and this tomcat here is Tom."

"Right. You were ordered to be Sophie and Tom. Don't dare to be somebody else."

"I don't understand," said Sophie. "I simply *am* Sophie."

"Nothing can happen or be without the order of His Majesty the Mighty King," the man said. "You will see. Follow me."

How should I describe the path they walked on or the landscape around? You would probably say all of this was made of clouds but you could walk on clouds only in a dream, couldn't you. A rather fantastic castle apparently made of cotton or dense white clouds loomed before them. Before it there was a beautiful garden full of strange cloudy trees and fountains. Weird men in azure robes and shiny cones of various sizes on their bald heads strolled through the garden. Suddenly, they all stopped in their tracks and stood motionless.

"What happened?" asked Sophie.

"Shhhh!" whispered the man whose name, by the way, was Aquarius. "Don't move."

"But why?"

"Nothing can happen because His Majesty rests before sunset, so he gives no orders. We are not supposed even to talk."

"But suppose we are not really talking," insisted Sophie. "Could you tell me why he has to rest just now?"

"You are a terrible girl," said the man unhappily. "I'll be fined for it... Well, be it as it must, it's probably ordered anyway. It's evening now and, in a moment, His Majesty has to tell the sun to go down. It takes a lot of His energy. You will see."

And really, after a little while everybody started to move again and all of them went quickly to a platform on the rim of a cloud or something very similar to it.

"Come, Tom," said Sophie. "We shouldn't miss it."

"His Majesty is an early riser," grumbled Tom. "I only started to rest."

Nonetheless, they ran with Aquarius to the platform. On the balcony high over their heads, an impressive figure appeared. He was taller and fatter than the others and he wore a shining golden robe and a glittering crown on his head.

"Sun," he shouted to the shining reddish ball just over the horizon. "I order you to go down."

Sophie looked at the sun.

"Nothing happened," she said.

"The sun is always reluctant to obey," said Aquarius with apprehension. "It does not like to be under the horizon."

"Sun, do you hear me?" shouted the king again. "I order you to go down now! Immediately!"

"See? It came to reason," Aquarius jubilated.

And really, the sun started to sink very slowly under the belt of dark clouds on the horizon.

"Now, we can only hope His Majesty will order it to rise again in the morning," said Aquarius with a somewhat worried look. "He always does but who can know His will?"

"But I thought that the sun goes up and down only because our Earth turns around," said Sophie. "I saw it in the Science Museum."

"A silly superstition from the seventeenth century," smiled Aquarius. "Don't say that you even believe the Earth is round like a ball," he laughed heartily. "What would the poor guys do when they turn to have their heads down? Fall off the Earth?" he roared with laughter.

"I don't know, I have to ask daddy," said Sophie.

"Tell me, why His Majesty doesn't order the Sun remain on the sky forever?" asked Tom. "Or jump up and down like a ball?"

Aquarius frowned.

"I hope you mean this question seriously," he said. "I have no time for any pranks. Ah, I see you are smiling!"

"It's the normal cat expression," retorted Tom. "I was ordered to be a tomcat so what can I do?"

“Right. Well, there is an argument between some learned men. Some say that His Majesty can do what He wants whereas the others argue that even He must have a sufficient reason for doing anything.”

“And what’s the sufficient reason for pushing the sun down and pulling it up again like a rabbit from a hat?”

Aquarius frowned.

“Don’t you know, you silly little cat? It gives us day and night. We rest at night and work during the day.”

“And what’s your work?” asked Sophie trying to be polite. “I mean your personal one.”

“Come with me, I’ll show you.”

He took them into a large area full of tubes with water running out of them into round basins from which it flowed again into other basins in an intricate cascade.

“I check the behavior of water,” he said proudly. “It’s a very important task.”

“But why?” asked Sophie.

Aquarius scratched his ear.

“It’s somewhat complicated, you know, but I’ll try to explain it simply. Water was ordered by His Majesty to flow down, which means always down, you know. Of course, everything can happen only according to His orders. What is allowed is ordered. And what is not ordered is not allowed. It is forbidden. But somehow, nobody understands how...”

He stopped, lost in his thoughts.

“Are you all right?” asked Sophie.

“What? Yes, suddenly some wild water appeared which had the insolence to flow upwards! Can you imagine it? Of course, it was caught immediately and got a sound flogging in the basin down there,” he pointed with his long finger. “But again...”

“What again?” asked Sophie impatiently.

“During this flogging, it simply disappeared. Some say it only ran away and is hidden in that black cloud over there. If it’s really so, I hope it will stop sulking soon and flow down as ordered. Anyway, water has been considered somewhat suspicious since that time. So I am checking that it behaves orderly.”

Tom yawned openly.

“What a responsible work,” he said.

Luckily, only Sophie noticed his mocking tone.

“Yes,” Aquarius retorted. “Although my friend Lapidus boasts that his work is even more responsible. It concerns the stones. They were ordered by His Majesty to stay still, you know. So Lapidus has a field full of stones and boulders of different kinds and sizes and he has to check they do so... do nothing, I mean.”

“It must be quite exhausting,” said Tom in the same tone.

“It is, if you think about it. The field with stones is quite large, he goes in one direction and checks on the stones before him – but how does he know some are not fooling around behind his back? So he has to turn back suddenly every other moment to see if everything is still. Very trying, I tell you.”

Tom turned his head several times and then adjusted himself for doing some serious thinking or simply to sleep. Sophie was anxious that Aquarius could be offended. Therefore, she spoke very loudly.

“And were some stones caught not being still?” she asked.

“Don’t shout,” Aquarius whispered. “It’s a state secret but you being only visitors... They were. But we know who is behind it.”

“Really?” mumbled Tom, already half asleep. “Some dark forces?”

“How do you know?” Aquarius said with wonder. “Yes, there is another kingdom with a very evil king who tries to oppose Our Majesty. Everything is topsy-turvy there, they say: when our sun goes down, ordered by His Majesty, it goes up there and their king has the impudence to say that it is because of his orders. And so on. The important thing is that this Dark Kingdom is trying to do all kinds of mischief in our Light Kingdom. They even sometimes attack us...”

At that very moment, a very bright lightning appeared in the sky and, almost immediately, a very loud thundering was heard.

“See? This is their attack. But His Majesty will have some answer to it.”

And really, another lightning flashed through the sky in the opposite direction with even louder thundering.

“I don’t like it,” Sophie said with apprehension. “I don’t want to be caught in some conflict of powers. Couldn’t we go back, please?”

“Yes, better. But be quick,” said Aquarius.

So they went back to the lift, which was still there, got into it and when Tom pressed the red button, they were back on the ground floor of the bookstore sooner than you could say Santa Barbara.

“What are you doing there?” asked one of the shop attendants seeing them. “It’s closing time.”

“We are going home,” said Sophie.

“All right, but wait a while, there is electric storm outside. It’s raining, too.”

“With the water running down?” asked Tom dreamily.

“How else?” said the man. “What a silly question.”

After a little while, the rain stopped and Sophie with Tom went home.

“Do you think the water in that dark cloud stopped sulking?” asked Sophie.

“Probably. But if I had been flogged...”

He did not finish his sentence. The idea was too horrible. Fortunately, no flogging took place in the world he lived in.

When they neared their house, Sophie noticed a little stream of water flowing in the ditch beside the road.

“See? Flowing down,” she said.

“As ordered,” said Tom.

Did he smile? Nobody could say: it was a normal cat expression.

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The invisibility cloak

One day – I cannot tell you the date exactly, but it certainly was not yesterday – Sophie was sitting on the porch with Tom. They were just after their afternoon snack and Tom was deep in serious thinking or, saying it bluntly, he was asleep. Sophie was in a strange mood: she somehow got suddenly bored by her building sets and puzzles and crayons, you name it. She wanted something new, something really exciting.

“Tom, would you like to be invisible?” she asked suddenly.

“What?” asked Tom opening one of his eyes.

“You are not very polite even for a cat,” said Sophie. “I asked you if you would like to be invisible. I mean sometimes, at your will.”

Tom yawned.

“It could get handy when hunting birds,” he murmured.

“I’ve never seen you hunting anything, let alone birds,” said Sophie.

“What’s the sense in trying if the bird always flies away?” said Tom. “I don’t like struggles that are lost in advance. I am a rational cat.”

“You are the laziest cat I have seen in my life, that’s what you are,” said Sophie.

“Who talked about politeness here?” growled Tom.

“OK, I take it back. You are the smartest cat I’ve ever seen. But turning back...”

“No turning of my back, please,” said Tom. “It has hurt me a bit lately.”

“You need some exercise. But I didn’t mean your back, I meant...”

She didn’t finish her sentence because she was seeing something really strange in the far corner of the garden. I know you will not believe it but what she saw was a pair of legs walking on the grass but nothing above them. She rubbed her eyes and looked again. Now, she saw a head without any body moving in the same direction. Then, a hand appeared out of the blue reaching upward and the head disappeared again.

“Do you see what I see?” she asked Tom in a worried way.

“You know this question is meaningless,” said Tom morosely. “How could I know?”

“Don’t start to be smart again,” said Sophie. “Simply look over there.”

This time, Tom lost all of his usual composure. His eyes simply bulged out of his head. The reason was really unbelievable: one leg walked in the grass without limping.

“Bernie was right after all,” Tom exclaimed. “Something is wrong with the universe.”

“You over there,” called Sophie. “What are you doing here?”

Immediately, a girl’s head appeared over the legs, which became two this time, and the apparition started walking in their direction.

“I just lost my way,” it said.

“You look like you lost more than that,” Sophie said with a shudder. “I don’t want to be rude but you seem to be kind of incomplete.”

“Were you in some battle or what?” asked Tom.

The apparition stopped and, quite suddenly, a whole girl somewhat older than Sophie appeared – well, almost whole, because a tiny bit of her right hand was missing still.

“Is this a talking cat?” she asked. “Or is it some trick of yours?”

“Tom talks a lot if he is in a mood,” Sophie answered. “Not everybody understands what he says, however. But talking about tricks, could you tell me how you managed to look like something from a bad dream?”

The girl looked at her in wonder.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “I am quite normal as far as I know.”

“Allow me,” said Tom courteously. “One leg only, without anything else that usually belongs to a human body, is not the usual way people go around. It’s like something from the Halloween, only worse.”

“Or a disconnected head bouncing in the air,” Sophie said. “That’s unusual, too.”

“There is probably some law against it,” Tom added. “At least here in Michigan.”

“Ah, that’s my invisibility cloak,” the girl said. “It keeps slipping down if I am not careful.”

“Your what?” exclaimed both Sophie and Tom.

“My invisibility cloak,” the girl said. “Somebody gave it to me. I am already tired of it. It gives you more trouble than fun. OK, could you show me the way out of the garden?”

Sophie showed the direction with her hand, still unable to speak. The strange girl ran away. But imagine, after she left, a part of the wooden railing at the right side of the porch was missing.

“See?” exclaimed Sophie. “She took a part of the railing with her.”

“Or,” said Tom hesitantly, “she left there...”

“The invisibility cloak,” Sophie completed, clapping her hands. “Yes, she probably forgot it here.”

“Or she left it here intentionally,” said Tom with a worried look.

“Great,” exclaimed Sophie.

She stood up and went to the railing.

“Don’t touch it,” shouted Tom. “It probably belongs to the military research or to some secret agency.”

“Or to some magician,” said Sophie. “I don’t care. I haven’t taken it from anybody, it was simply found on our railing. I would like to try it out but the problem is I cannot see it.”

“It stands to reason,” said Tom. “It must be invisible if it should make you the same.”

“There!” exclaimed Sophie.

She reached with her fingers into the gap where the railing should be and touched a very fine fabric. It was kind of slippery so that she lost her grip on it several times. In the end, she held it firmly so that she was able to drag it over her body.

“How do I look?” she asked.

“Horrible,” said Tom with a shudder. “I see one of your arms and a part of your leg. May be some modern artist would appreciate it but I am a conservative cat, you know.”

“I need a mirror and a little training,” Sophie said.

She – or some parts of her, from Tom’s point of view – went inside. Tom closed his eyes but no serious thinking came. The memory of what he just saw was too horrible.

After a while, Sophie called him.

“Where are you?” asked Tom.

“Here,” came her voice out of thin air or so it seemed. “Come, let’s visit Bernie. I cannot wait how surprised he will be.”

Reluctantly, Tom went after her – or, rather, after the sounds of her steps. When they came to Bernie’s house, the dog was half asleep on the porch. He moved one ear, then opened one of his eyes and, after that, he sniffed vigorously the air.

“Funny,” he said. “I smell Sophie but I see a shabby cat. Are you going around in a disguise, Sophie?”

“Don’t you know me, you retarded dog?” asked Tom not very politely.

“Yes, I know you, you imitation cat,” said Bernie with a frown. “I’ll deal with you in a moment. But where’s Sophie? I smell her clearly.”

“Here,” exclaimed Sophie. “Just before you.”

Bernie buried his face in his paws.

“I knew my sight got worse,” he wailed. “But I did not expect to get blind so soon.”

“You are not blind, Bernie,” Sophie said soothingly. “I am invisible.”

“How awful. Did you see a doctor?” asked Bernie.

“It’s not a disease,” said Sophie. “I’m just wearing an invisibility cloak.”

“What a strange word. Do you mean you can hide in it?”

“As you see.”

“I don’t see anything,” said Bernie.

“That’s what it is for. Let’s go downtown and have some fun with it.”

Reluctantly, Bernie stood up and they went to town. Soon, a police car stopped near them. A policeman looked out of the window.

“There is a stray dog here on the Unity Street,” he said into his phone. “And a stray cat, too. Send some emergency patrol here, quick.”

“They are not lost,” exclaimed Sophie. “They are with me.”

The policeman looked baffled.

“Did somebody speak here?” he said in a sharp tone looking around.

“I only said that Bernie is not lost and neither is Tom,” said Sophie.

The policeman looked even more baffled if possible.

“Just stay calm,” he said to himself. “You know that animals don’t speak. This is reality, not a movie. You just had a long day and...”

“Are you all right?” asked Sophie with some concern.

“My god, I’m going mad,” exclaimed the policeman.

He drove off in a high speed sounding his siren.

“Let’s quickly turn to the side-street before some gang of animal-lovers comes with a big car,” said Tom.

“They are usually well-meaning,” said Bernie.

“Yes. That’s why they are dangerous,” growled Tom. “Look, there is a cafe here. Sophie, you could go inside and take some sweet cake for me. Nobody would notice when you are invisible.”

“That would be stealing!” exclaimed Sophie.

“Yes it would. But what’s the worry? Nobody could catch you.”

“You have no morality,” said Sophie.

“What can you expect? I am a cat,” retorted Tom.

“That’s no excuse,” said Sophie.

“I thought you were my friend,” Tom said sadly.

“I am. But that doesn’t mean doing naughty things for you,” Sophie said. “However, to show you I am a real friend, I’m going to buy you a cake. I have a five dollar note which I found on the street some time ago.”

And, before Tom or Bernie could prevent it, she entered the cafe. Well, one has to assume she entered it because she couldn’t be seen. Nobody was in the cafe at that time only the attendant behind the counter, an elderly haggard man, and his colleague, a young girl, probably a student, who was sweeping the floor.

“I’ll have one of these cakes, please,” said Sophie.

“Which one?” asked the attendant without raising his eyes.

“The chocolate one. How much does it cost?”

“Two sixty,” said the man putting a cake on a piece of paper.

He took the five dollar note and put the change on the counter. Suddenly, his eyes bulged when he noticed how the change disappeared before his eyes and, after that, the cake lifted itself into the air and slowly moved to the exit.

“Mary,” he said in a worried tone. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Certainly,” laughed the girl. “You look like one.”

“Excuse me,” said Sophie who was blocked by her.

The girl jumped and made several shaky steps backwards. She observed with opened mouth how the chocolate cake swam in the air to the exit and then disappeared.

“OK, here is your cake,” Sophie said. “Let’s go over there into the park, I see a free bench where you can eat it. May be Bernie could have a bit of it, too.”

They started to cross the street but suddenly jumped when a horn of some car honked near them.

“You stupid animals, get off the street,” shouted a fat man from the car. “That’s really the limit, stray dogs and cats blocking the traffic.”

“They are no stray animals, they are with me,” shouted Sophie back.

The man looked stupefied.

“Did somebody speak here?” he asked with apprehension.

“Yes,” said Sophie. “You have free way now, you can proceed.”

“Probably some electronic device,” murmured the man. “They keep inventing such weird things and we have to pay for it.”

He drove off. In the meantime, Sophie with Tom and Bernie came to the bench. Sophie broke the cake into two and gave a half to each of her friends. Tom jumped on the bench and sat beside Sophie. Bernie lied down at her feet. The afternoon sun shined on them. It was a little hot under the invisibility cloak. No wonder that Sophie bared her legs for a while and also slipped one of her arms out of the cloak.

“Look, ma,” exclaimed a little boy passing by with his mother. “There are only legs and an arm here.”

His mother stopped and looked at the bench.

“My god,” she cried in a horrified way. “What horror! They left the legs and one arm only and are still munching the rest. Help, there are wild animals eating children here!”

And she ran away, dragging the boy with her. Soon after that, a police siren could be heard again.

“Well, I had enough,” said Sophie and threw the cloak off her. “Let’s go before some policeman comes.”

And they simply went home. The invisibility cloak remained on the bench. I don’t know if it is still there. Last time I went by, part of the bench seemed to be missing. But may be it was not because of the cloak.

The great jigsaw puzzle

So you like puzzles? Well, everybody does – at least those who are good at them. Sophie liked jigsaw puzzles and she solved larger and larger sets containing – wait for it – a hundred or even more peaces. Tom, the smartest cat in the world and beyond, watched her arranging one peace to another and didn't say anything. What he thought was anybody's guess but I suspect that it was something like "What a waste of time, putting colored peaces of cardboard together. Cats have better things to do." And he closed his eyes, probably intending to do some of these "better things".

Before Sophie exclaims triumphantly when having completed the puzzle and thus tears Tom out of his deepest thoughts and the plot of this tale can continue, I have to tell you something about the history. Please, don't protest, we have to kill the time somehow.

I don't know how they make these things nowadays but the first jigsaw puzzle was invented many years ago and it must have happened in the following way. A young painter, who was – between you and me – just a beginner and not a very skillful one, painted a picture on a peace of plywood. It was a rather jolly scene with a very blue sky, a brown house, a green lawn with a tree in full blossom and a little girl playing with a red ball in front of it. To make the whole scene even happier, a very yellow sun was shining in the sky.

The painter finished his picture and looked at it with satisfaction. It was simply beautiful, or so he thought. But as it very often is, it didn't seem to him to be so beautiful the following day and, as the days went by, he liked it less and less and even started to hate it for its imperfections. One day, in a frenzy of anger, he tried to wash his painting off. But the paint already dried so that it resisted his attempts to remove it. Then he thought about burning the painting – but he couldn't find the matches and was also afraid he could put his house on fire. So he took a saw – that kind called jigsaw, which allows you to saw in different directions – and sawed the painting into a number of irregular fragments so that nobody could see what he originally painted. He left the sorry peaces of his ruined painting on the floor and went for a long walk trying to forget the whole affair.

But there was a smart little girl in the house who was very inquisitive. She had heard the sound of sawing from her father's room and wanted to know what it was all about. So she came in and found the peaces of plywood on the floor. She liked them for their color and simply played with them at first. But then she noticed that some of the peaces can be put together and the colors on them made some sense. Well, to make a long story short, she just assembled the whole picture when her father came back. He was quite angry at first, seeing his deplorable picture completed again. But, when he saw how pleased the little girl was, he had an idea. Maybe he wasn't a very gifted painter but he could give people pleasure in a different way and even make himself rich in the process. He painted another similar picture on a peace of plywood and when it dried, he sawed it into peaces, put them into a cardboard box and took it to the nearby store selling playthings. It was a great success and, in such way, the jigsaw puzzle was born. Well, some will say that it happened in a different way but you know people: they always come with their own version of the story.

Approximately at the same time, the scientists started to divide the world into still smaller and smaller peaces – well, not really the world itself, not their tables or chairs or even their sandwiches which they had for lunch, but the image of the world they held in their minds. Curiously enough, it was not because they wanted to turn the world into a puzzle. It was the other way round: the world or some of its properties looked like a puzzle to them and they hoped to understand it better by taking one tiny bit after the other. I don't know if they succeeded, maybe they are still at it.

Anyway, we have to go back to our tale because Sophie just finished assembling her puzzle and cried triumphantly.

“I got it,” she exclaimed.

“You got what?” growled Tom.

“What do you think I have been doing for such a long time?” asked Sophie. “The jigsaw puzzle, don’t you remember?”

“The puzzle,” repeated Tom dreamily. “There are many puzzles in the world.”

He probably meant something he just dreamed about.

“Which puzzles?” asked Sophie who was always keen to learn new things.

“Er, various,” mumbled Tom reluctantly.

“Such as?”

“For instance, why the birds always fly away when I try to make friends with them...”

“That’s no puzzle, silly,” exclaimed Sophie. “They know how short such friendship would be.”

“How can they know? I usually am a good companion, well groomed, with refined manners, rather good at conversation...”

“Cats eat birds, don’t they? At least cats which are not as lazy as somebody I could name. Do you now some bird eating cats?”

“Heaven forbid! What a terrible idea!”

“You see. So the friendship wouldn’t be exactly equal. Do you know about some real puzzle?” asked Sophie.

“Where’s the pearl you said you got from that so-called fishcat.”

“You mean catfish,” said Sophie. “Yes its disappearing is a mystery. I probably lost it in that wood behind Bernie’s house. Let’s go and look for it.”

“Not again! It’s like looking for Bernie’s bone. We already tried.”

“We did it in a half-hearted way. Let’s really try. I need some motion anyway.”

Sophie went out of the house and Tom had to follow. He could stay behind but the idea of a bird eating cats expressed by Sophie suddenly horrified him. Yes, he knew that cats eat birds and not the other way round. But did the birds know it, too? Suppose some finch or some cardinal, not speaking about the crows or some huge condor... He quickened his pace to catch up with Sophie.

They came to Bernie’s house. Can you guess what Bernie was doing? Yes, it looked like he was not doing anything except sleeping and this does not count as a kind of action.

“What’s up?” he said dreamily when they woke him up. “I was just deep in my thoughts.”

“And what brilliant ideas flew through the vast empty expanses of your head?” asked Tom.

Bernie was suddenly awake.

“Tom,” he said. “You know very well that you are scarcely larger than my mouth except for your mangy tail. The reason why I haven’t demonstrated it to you yet is that I loathe the cat fur. But I can suppress this aversion.”

“For this, you have to catch me,” said Tom mockingly.

At this moment, Bernie leaped. But Tom also leaped and made his way up the nearest tree. Sitting on a branch Bernie couldn’t reach, he looked down to the dog.

“What a waste of energy,” he said. “Don’t you know about global warming?”

“It’s not the end of it,” roared Bernie shaking the tree.

“Stop it, you two,” cried Sophie. “You should be ashamed of yourself. Aren’t we friends? I need you both to help me to look for my little pearl, can’t you understand?”

So they stopped their quarrel which they didn’t mean quite seriously anyway and the three of them went into the near wood where they started their search – at least Sophie started

it while Bernie sniffed every bush for the scent of other dogs and Tom looked up to the trees where many birds flew to and fro shouting in different bird languages Tom didn't understand. What if they organized a collective attack on him? He almost knew it was not probable but how can one be sure?

Anyway, Sophie looked intently at the ground. But have you ever tried to find some such small thing as a pearl in a wood? It's nearly hopeless. Sophie tried to ask some ants and caterpillars and bugs that were passing by if they haven't seen a pearl but she got no answer.

"Why they don't talk to me?" she asked angrily.

"Ants don't speak," said Tom with scorn.

"But they talked to us in the Science Museum!"

"That was another situation," said Tom. "We were tiny, remember?"

And he shuddered. The birds must see him as tiny, he thought, when looking down from the trees. Suppose they took it for real and started to attack him... You say Tom was no hero? Well, it happens to many of us when some frightening idea got stuck in our minds.

At that very moment, Sophie saw a rabbit nearby.

"Excuse me," she exclaimed.

The rabbit turned its head but quickly ran away when it saw Bernie.

"I only wanted to ask something," shouted Sophie.

"Sorry, I have an appointment with the eardresser," said the rabbit and disappeared in the undergrowth.

"Eardresser?" said Sophie. "I never heard anything like it."

"It probably has something to do with the shape of their ears. Rabbits will do anything to make themselves more attractive," said Tom with contempt. "Look, there comes a deer or rather a stag."

And really, a stag with magnificent antlers came from the other side. When it saw Bernie, it stood still.

"Excuse me," said Sophie. "Haven't you seen a little pearl on the ground somewhere in this wood?"

"A pearl?" said the deer. "Is it some kind of grass?"

"No, it is round and rather white," said Sophie.

"Some mushroom perhaps?" said the deer.

"No, it is hard and shiny like a pebble but much more beautiful."

"I haven't seen anything like it," said the stag. "Now, I have to excuse myself. There are my ladies, I mean does, waiting for me."

And he ran away, too.

"Of course," said Tom with contempt. "What can you expect from a deer. The only function of his head is to carry these ridiculous antlers."

"Nothing doing," said Sophie gloomily. "We have to go back."

"Hehehe," said a strange bird sitting on a near branch. "You cannot."

Hehehe is not a word in any of the bird languages I know. And the bird was really strange – it had many colors which constantly changed. Between you and me, I think it was an imp in a bird disguise. Well, I know that no imps or sprites exist – but what other could it be? One moment, it looked like a bird, the next one like a squirrel and the next like a chameleon – and we all know that no chameleons live in our woods. So it must have been an imp.

"Why not?" asked Sophie.

"You will see, hehehe," said the imp.

And they saw. Something was quite out of order with the part of wood where the path should go right to Bernie's house. And not only with the wood itself but with the world in general: where the blue sky should be there was some part of a green lawn and also some brown section of a house. And, conversely, where the path should be there was some blue

patch like an ink blot, only much lighter. You could see a part of the path but it was somewhere in the height, apparently leading into the sky which was not there, however.

“Water, here?” said Bernie in baffled way, looking at the blue patch before them. “I don’t remember any pond near our house.”

“You cannot recall it because it wasn’t there, you dunce,” said Tom. “Somebody rearranged everything. Nothing is in its proper place.”

“See? Such is the state of the Universe,” said Bernie in a very melancholy way.

“Don’t start your whining again,” growled Tom. “It’s only a practical joke that strange bird arranged. I knew that birds cannot be trusted.”

“Wait a minute,” Sophie said. “It reminds me of a jigsaw puzzle. If we take this blue blotch and put it over there and shift this section of the house...”

“How could you shift a house?” cried Tom. “It’s too heavy.”

“Don’t be a coward and help me instead,” said Sophie. “We’ll find a way.”

And really, the rearranging of this muddle was easier than one would expect. It was like shifting large peaces of cardboard. Of course, sometimes the strength of Bernie or Tom’s ability to climb anywhere in height was needed but, after an hour or so, the scene was in order again. Well, up to a point: there were three irregular holes left in it quite on the ground. And, because of them, everything looked like a cardboard scene in a theatre, not like the real world.

“I don’t understand,” said Sophie. “Everything matches so nicely like in a jigsaw puzzle but something is missing still.”

“Maybe we forgot something,” said Tom.

“Or we have to start again from the beginning,” added Bernie gloomily.

“Wait, I have it,” cried Sophie. “Bernie, would you be so kind and put yourself into that hole on the left? You fit in nicely, don’t you? And Tom, could you do the same with the hole on the right? I myself will step in into that one in the middle.”

They all three did as she said and lo and behold, the enchantment was broken and they were simply on the path leading to Bernie’s house.

And this is the end of this tale. Some will say that it was only Sophie’s dream during her afternoon nap she took after having solved an exceptionally difficult jigsaw puzzle. But who knows? There are various strange things in this world which is in constant turmoil as Bernie would say.

= = =

Kite weather

There is danger everywhere. You don't believe me? When I was young, they made such sweaters that liked to bite you. Some young ones were merely itchy or bit you mildly, but some mature sweaters were so fierce that they had to be held in cages as they bit anybody who touched them. As one could expect, soon a League for the Protection of Sweaters was established and any restraining of sweaters in cages was declared to be unlawful. But, at the same time, the owners were held responsible if their sweaters bit or even ate up their visitors. In the end, everybody who had such a fierce thing at home was bound to have a large notice on the outer door saying "Beware of the sweater".

There were other dangerous things such as T-shirts which shrank whenever they were touched by water. Quite a lot of people simply vanished after they got soaked in a rain – only a little ball of dense fabric was found instead of them if they were too slow to take the T-shirt off. You don't believe me? Well, I never saw it with my eyes, I have to admit. But I know about the nylon underwear which kept crawling up and I remember having seen some shiny nylon knickers on the top of a tall tree. I fear thinking what happened to its owner. And what about those pajamas which make you fully awake whenever you put them on? Not speaking about the mittens which start crawling away in different directions the moment you don't watch them closely.

OK, I got somewhat lost in my speech. What I wanted to talk about were kites. They seem to be quite harmless things but it's no coincidence that they are called "dragons" in many foreign languages. The kites know it secretly and they only wait for the chance to show their real nature. Sophie got to know it one day.

Have you ever flied a kite? Well, first of all you have to have one. They can be bought but it's much better to build one yourself. You need some light paper, at least six thin wooden sticks or better skewers and two cords – a short one for the tail and a very long one by which you hold the kite back when it tries to fly away. When you have built a kite using some glue, don't forget the tail, please, otherwise it would be ashamed of its handicap and all tailless kites are known to be erratic. OK, suppose it was finished. Then it is indispensable to paint a face on it, which is the most difficult thing. Why? You give the kite its personality by it. You certainly would not like to give the dragon – excuse me, the kite – some evil or violent face. So people usually paint a clown's face with a wide grin.

"I don't know," said Tom, observing the progress. "Would you like to fly about with a steady grin? It must hurt your face muscles, grinning all the time."

"You are the right one to say it," answered Sophie.

"I don't grin," said Tom with dignity. "I have a subtle smile if anything. Besides, cats only seem to smile. They are usually serious."

"I don't know about cats but a kite should be jolly."

"But not crazy," said Tom.

However, he said it in a soft voice and Sophie did not hear him.

Well, what I forgot to say is that one more thing you need for flying a kite properly is the right kite weather. You tell me that weather is not a thing? You might be right but you need it anyway. The right kite weather is always in the autumn, say the end of September or some time in October when the sky is clear with only a few white clouds on it and the wind is steady. Incidentally, such weather was just that day I am talking about.

"Come, Tom," said Sophie holding the grinning kite in one hand. "Let's take Bernie and fly the kite together."

"Bernie is too lazy to do anything," growled Tom.

“Well, laziness seems to be contagious,” smiled Sophie. “I could name somebody who holds the world record in it.”

And she simply stepped out of the house and went along the Travel Road to the Bernie’s house. Well, you know, it wasn’t really Bernie’s, some people lived in it, too, but they never came out when Sophie was around. Tom went reluctantly in her trail. He considered all this fuss with the kite to be an unnecessary waste of energy and, to be quite frank, he didn’t like the grinning face of this monster. But he avoided being alone lately because of some strange ideas about the birds preparing some attack on him. He couldn’t recall how such nonsense nested in his head. It was nonsense, wasn’t it? He knew it but did the birds know it, too?

Bernie was not sleeping for once. He was gnawing on a large bone and looked much less melancholy than the other times.

“Um, hello Sophie,” he said.

“There are two of us,” said Sophie with a light frown.

“Yeah, hi Tom, if you insist,” said Bernie good-naturedly. “I am sorry I cannot give you my whole attention, I have something important to do.”

“Have you found your famous bone at last?” asked Tom.

“Don’t mention that one,” said Bernie in a somewhat nervous manner. “Somebody must have stolen it. This is a new one and very tasty, I can tell you.”

“Everybody to his own taste,” said Tom with irony.

“We are going to fly this,” said Sophie quickly before a row between these two could start. She showed Bernie the big kite.

“Is it a new experiment of yours?” asked Bernie looking at the kite with distrust. “What is it or rather who is it?”

“It’s only a kite,” said Sophie. “We are going to fly it. Come with us, we need your strength.”

Bernie looked embarrassed.

“Um, you know I like you,” he said. “I even can stand this nasty cat because of you. And I would like to help you if it were not for this bone.”

“Can’t you eat it afterwards?” asked Sophie.

“That’s not the problem,” said Bernie. “But if I take it with me, I could lose it. If I leave it here, somebody could steal it.”

“Some lunatic, you mean?” asked Tom.

“Some dog. And if I hide it somewhere, it could end like with the former one. I’ll forget the place or some other dog finds it or... There are many possibilities. The logistics of keeping a bone is quite complicated, you see.”

“I have an idea,” said Sophie.

She took the bone with her free hand and went into the house. There, very near to the door, she found a very old man in a rocking chair. It took quite a moment before the man noticed her.

“What are you bringing me, little girl, a kite?” he said in a very thin voice.

“No, I bring a bone. Could you keep it for some time?”

“Sure,” said the man. “I will cook a tasty soup from it.”

“I don’t mean that,” said Sophie impatiently. “It belongs to Bernie, your dog.”

“My dog?” asked the man with wonder.

“Yes, a very big one. I call him Bernie because St. Bernardine is too long. You probably gave the bone to him, don’t you remember?”

“If you say so,” answered the old man without conviction.

“Please, keep it for him. He would be very sad otherwise.”

“He is always sad,” said the man. “I have never seen a dog to be so sad. Of course, the world is a rather sad place, at least for such an old man as I am, but one should take it bravely. When I was younger...”

“Excuse me,” Sophie interrupted his speech which threatened to be very long. “I have to go. So would you be so kind and keep it for Bernie?”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“The bone. Belongs to Bernie. Could you remember that?”

“I’ll try, my dear. I’ll certainly try.”

Hoping that the old man will remember not to eat the bone himself, Sophie returned to the porch. She made Bernie and Tom stop one of their endless quarrels and go with her to the field where the kites were flied. It was already full of older children and the air above them was equally full of kites of various sorts and colors. Some of them had just bird-like forms and flew to and fro in a rather erratic way. But there was a gang of fiercely grinning or frowning kites which chased each other high in the sky.

“That’s the right place, you see,” said Sophie. “We are going to fly our kite here.”

“Don’t you need some flying license or something?” asked Tom.

“Not for the kite, I am sure,” said Sophie.

“But you had some training in the flying school?”

“No need of it,” said Sophie. “It’s quite easy. You simply put the kite up...”

At the same time, a gush of wind took the kite out of her hands and carried it up and up to the sky.

“Quick, Bernie,” shouted Sophie. “Catch the cord!”

Bernie caught the end of the cord with his teeth and the kite started to dance above their heads. It – or I should rather say he considering the grinning face – was visibly pleased. He flew up and down, tried some jumps and turns and even more sophisticated maneuvers. But being a beginner, he did not make an elaborated pirouette he intended and suddenly fell head-on into nearby bushes. He shivered and jumped there but could not get free from the grip of branches.

“Tom,” exclaimed Sophie. “We have to free him before he harms himself. Bernie, please, keep holding the cord.”

Reluctantly, Tom ran after Sophie and they both tried to free the fidgety kite from the bush without tearing his paper. Eventually they succeeded. Then, suddenly, when they were still gripping the kite, they were lifted into the air. Afterwards, nobody could say what exactly happened but, with the highest probability, Bernie saw some attractive bitch and ran to her holding the end of the cord in his teeth. Propelled by the tight cord against the wind, the kite took off the ground with Sophie and Tom clutching to his body.

Soon they were high above the heads of other children and still climbing up. That was bad enough – but what was even worse, the gang of fierce kites or rather dragons, which were chasing each other in the height, started to attack them.

“Look, what a strange dragon with a girl and a cat on his back,” laughed one. “Isn’t it too much to carry, brother?”

“See his grin?” shouted another one. “He surely knows some joke he does not share.”

“Let’s punch him in the ribs if he does not tell it,” suggested another one with a terrible frown.

The kite carrying Sophie and Tom was visibly afraid of them.

“The one joke is,” he said with a quivering voice, “that this St. Bernardine dog down there fell in love with a dachshund.”

All the dragons laughed heartily. Sophie looked down and saw that Bernie really made some sniffing advances to a tiny dog less than a tenth of his size. Even funnier was that this

doggie had short bandy legs and a relatively long body so that it reminded her of a caterpillar from this height.

“Bernie, don’t be a fool,” she shouted.

“And the other joke is,” cried the kite much more self-confidently, “that no cord holds me any more.”

And really, Bernie looked up when hearing Sophie’s voice and opened his mouth in wonder. It gets without saying that the cord slipped from his teeth and flew up with the kite.

“We are lost,” cried Tom. “The wind will blow us to the lake and we’ll drown in it.”

But, as I said, the kite was a beginner. No self-confidence helped him when a next gush of wind came and threw him into the crown of a tall tree. This was the end of the journey. But what about Sophie and Tom?

Tom was out of practice, no doubt, but his cat instincts were ready nonetheless: he clutched a branch readily and climbed down it. Sophie tried to mimic him but she was much less skillful. Nonetheless, she climbed somehow down till they both reached the lowest branch of the tree.

“What now?” she said with worry.

“We have to jump,” said Tom.

“But it’s too high!”

“Never mind. The important thing is to land on all four legs.”

“But I have only two,” protested Sophie.

“Then you have to be very careful,” said Tom and jumped.

After some hesitation, Sophie jumped, too. Luckily, Bernie had seen their short journey and ran to the tree to be of some help. Thus Sophie landed on him.

“Ouch!” cried Bernie. “Are you trying to break my back?”

“Sorry,” said Sophie. “I didn’t know you were here. I thought you were on your honeymoon trip.”

“You mean that dachshund bitch?” said Bernie with distaste. “That’s a finished affair. Imagine, we haven’t even sniffed each other properly and she asked me how many bones I have at home. What a cheek, considering her crooked legs!”

Tom wanted to say something but Sophie looked at him sternly. So he only shrugged.

“What are we going to do with the kite?” asked Sophie.

“He seems to be quite happy up there, considering his grin,” said Tom.

So they left the disobedient kite in the tree and went home.

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The number riot

Do you like numbers? Ah, you find this question strange – numbers are simply there for our use whether we like them or not. But it is not so simple, you know. First of all, where are they? Everywhere? Well, this is almost the same as saying they are nowhere. In my experience, they are rather spiteful little things. They run away when I need them – for example when I need to recall some date. And they come back very eagerly when I have to pay some bill. Or take some long addition: very often, some other number jumps into the place where the right number should be – and, as you can imagine, the addition goes quite wrong.

As I say, I have my difficulties with numbers. But I cannot say that I prefer some number to the others or, conversely, that I detest some among them. Not so Sophie. She liked numbers, at least most of them. But, for some reason I don't remember, she did not like the number nine. Daddy, mommy, Tom or Bernie, even the birds in the garden could not understand it and some of them tried to talk her out of it. But Sophie was adamant: she did not like nine, she wouldn't even say its name aloud. What can you do in such a case? If you can think of some way, tell it to me. In the meantime, I have to proceed with my tale.

It was one of these days when everything seems to be a little strange. You cannot put your finger on it – by the way, did you ever try to put your finger on a day? I don't mean on a calendar, that's easy. I mean on a day as such. It's like the numbers: it's here but if you try to put your finger on it, there is only thin air there.

But never mind. It simply was a strange day. Although it was the end of September, the day was quite warm and Sophie and Tom were sitting on the porch.

"What do you think about numbers?" asked Sophie Tom suddenly.

"What?" growled Tom who was, just by chance, half asleep.

"You should be more civil for such an intelligent cat."

"I beg your pardon," said Tom. "What was the question again?"

"I asked you, what you think about numbers."

"Numbers of what," asked Tom.

"Just numbers. One, two, three, four, five and so on."

"What a preposterous question," said Tom in a dignified way. "Cats are not interested in such silly things."

"Are you telling me that cats do no counting? The other day, when I gave you only one cookie, you wanted another."

"That's quite a different thing," said Tom stretching his back. "I'm a practical cat. When I want more of something tasty," he licked his lips, "I don't need any silly numerals. By the way, speaking of cookies, couldn't you spare one or two?"

"See?" exclaimed Sophie. "You just did it."

"I did what?"

"Counting. You said one or two," said Sophie.

"It's just a manner of speaking. But you haven't answered my question."

"OK," said Sophie. "But you eat too much sweet. If you will continue this way, you will be soon like a furry ball."

"I will burn it off when hunting birds."

Sophie looked at him and laughed.

"You are hunting birds in your dreams only," she said.

"Don't you know that the brain takes most of the energy we acquire from food? When I think about hunting birds, I need a lot of energy."

Knowing that there is no sense in arguing with a talking cat, Sophie went to a kitchen and brought three cookies and a bowl of milk.

“Do you want one, two or three cookies?” she asked.

“Three,” said Tom immediately.

“See? You are counting.”

“No,” said Tom with a cat smile. “I only know that three is the most you have.”

So Tom ate all three cookies and licked the whole bowl of milk and then went very slowly to the porch to burn the acquired energy by dreaming about hunting birds.

Sophie was left alone. She did not like to be alone. Well, she was not exactly alone but as Tom was asleep or, as he called it, occupied by deep thinking, it came to the same thing. Bernie was somewhere attending to his dog’s duties so she had to find some distraction. She looked at the row of sheets on which the numerals from one to nine were written in different colors. She sometimes played with them doing dome addition and subtractions. But she wasn’t in a mood for it that day.

“You numbers,” she said half in jest. “Tell me why I should be interested in you.”

To her surprise, the numbers started to speak.

“I’m always the first, remember,” said the number One proudly. “Isn’t it a great thing to be always the first? And I’m the only one with the right body posture. Look at Two how it is stooping.”

“What are you talking about,” said Two angrily. “I’m like a swan floating majestically on water. Swans are considered to be beautiful. There are some others behind me I could name who are much worse.”

“If you mean me,” said Three cheerfully, “I’m proud of my ample forms, quite agreeable to many. At least, I’m not skinny and looking like a chair as somebody here.”

“You mean me, of course,” said Four scornfully. “You think being obese is attractive nowadays? But, of course, you have some friends here, don’t you. There is another fatso behind me. You both should have some exercise now and than, you know.”

“What you need,” retorted Five in an offended way, “is some manners, you know, or some correctness, saying it in a modern way. Fatso is an offensive word, especially from someone who looks like an assembly of sticks. I at least am standing upright, not as somebody behind me who actually is another number which has fallen on its nose.”

“I’m nothing of the sort,” said Six in a dignified manner. “I am who I am. And I am standing in the preferred posture of my exercise, one hand over my head. There are others behind me, constantly falling backwards and trying to grip something with their arm.”

“How can you, you phony,” cried Seven. “I’m stretching my back in a real exercise, which you merely pretend. Look how slim I am. You should get some motion unless you want to acquire such a funny body like that fellow behind me.”

“What?” shouted Eight. “I have the only natural body in this company. Look, I have a head and a body. Who from the others can say that? I’m a little stout, I admit, but would you like me to be like that ridiculous fellow behind me?”

“Stop,” cried Sophie. “There is nobody there.”

“How so?” said all the numbers.

“I don’t like Nine. I don’t want even say its name. For me, it does not exist.”

“But it’s unfair to deny my existence,” cried Nine. “Actually, I have a higher value than all these show-offs before me.”

“Never mind,” said Sophie. “I don’t like you. And I already saw you in the row, only standing on your head. I don’t like such stunts.”

“That wasn’t me but my poor cousin Six,” objected Nine.

“I said, never mind,” said Sophie. “I simply don’t acknowledge you.”

“But I am needed,” whined Nine. “What do you get if you add one to eight?”

“The same as seven plus two or six plus three.”

“That’s no number!” shouted Nine.

“But it is right,” said Sophie. “It’s not only your form I don’t like but also your being always late. When the numbers line up, you always linger at the end. You must be lazy, I think.”

“Far from it,” said Nine eagerly. “I can do rolls no other number can. Look.”

And it rolled making 969, then even 96969.

“What do you say to it?” it asked proudly.

“Six can do it, too,” said Sophie.

“But it would mean much less.”

“Never mind, I am already tired of you,” said Sophie and went to Tom who was not only thinking, but really deeply thinking on a porch.

She paid no attention to some commotion that took place behind her in the room and looked gloomily into the garden. She was bored. Then, suddenly, she looked with some alarm at the far end of the garden. It looked as if some strange flowers or maybe plants suddenly appeared there. They had a fat if hollow body on a thin bent stem and they had different colors though most of them were black. More and more of them appeared there, some of them simply standing while others jumped to and fro or chased each other around the crowd. I said that they looked like strange flowers but not wanting to hide the truth, I have to tell you that they simply looked like the number nine.

“Do you see what I see?” asked Sophie Tom.

“Oh, not again,” groaned Tom. “We already had this conversation. I explained to you that there is no way to tell.”

“Don’t be too haughty,” said Sophie. “Would you be so kind and look at the far end of the garden, if it’s not too much labor to open your eyes?”

Tom did so and his eyes almost rolled out of his head. What he saw was even worse than the incomplete body of a girl which appeared the other day due to the invisibility cloak. There was a huge crowd of strange forms, reminding him of something, constantly growing in the far end of the garden.

“I must be dreaming,” he said. “And it’s not a dream I would prefer.”

“It’s no dream,” said Sophie. “I see it too.”

“Some aliens, maybe?” said Tom.

“It would be the better possibility,” said Sophie. “I fear they are...”

She stopped not wanting to say the word nine.

“You there in the garden,” she shouted angrily. “What are you doing there?”

“We have a meeting,” cried one of them, an especially large nine.

“What for?” asked Sophie.

“We are going on strike.”

Sophie heard it with wonder. But she was not impressed. As far as she knew, a strike always meant that some people stop working. But what did the nines do besides irritating her?

“OK, strike as much as you like,” she shouted. “Only do it somewhere else.”

After that, all the nines went behind a bush and were not seen.

“What relief,” Sophie sighed.

Tom only closed his eyes, probably trying to find a dream more attractive than the scene he just witnessed.

In a little while, a postman peeped in from the sidewalk.

“Hi, little girl,” he said. “Don’t you know where Travel Road number nineteen is? I have an important letter for Sophie and Tom at this address but I cannot find it.”

“But it is here,” exclaimed Sophie.

"It cannot be," said the postman. "You are number one. Well, nothing doing, I have to look elsewhere."

Before Sophie could say anything, he jumped into his car and left.

"It's strange," said Sophie. "I don't count over ten but I remember how the number on our house looks like. Let's go and see."

"What's the use," said Tom dreamily. "One number or another..."

"You are lazy, that's what you are. I'm going alone."

So she went to the front door of their house, Tom reluctantly after her. And really, instead of the number 19 on their house there was only 1 and an empty space beside it. At the same time, a large car stopped in front of the house.

"Hi, girlie," shouted a fat man from its cabin. "You daddy ordered a repair of your veranda for today, saying September 29th, 2009. So we came. But as I see on the calendar through your window, it's September 2nd, 200. So we have to wait here eighteen hundred years and seventeen days. We charge eight dollars for every hour of waiting, so it will cost... Oh, I need a computer for it."

At the same time, the phone started ringing in the house. Sophie was not supposed to answer it but as the ringing was annoying, she took the receiver.

"Is this the Special service for demented parrots?" asked a voice in the phone.

"No it isn't."

"How so? I dialed..." and the man said some complicated number from which Sophie understood only that no number nine was in it.

"I'm sorry," she said and replaced the phone.

But the phone kept ringing. People wanted the service rescuing raccoons stuck in the chimney, then the store selling special gadgets against dwarfs, then some very excited woman wanted to know if it is true that the Earth is in fact hollow and what will happen when she digs a hole in order to plant a tree. After that, Sophie received some report from a local policeman that some suspicious individuals wearing big red noses were gathering around some cafe. Another very excited woman wanted her to publish a warning that the newest trendy dresses for doggies were dangerous because of a faulty zipper. Some young man wanted to know if it is true that some aliens have stolen the Earth's axis (in fact, he pronounced it as axe) and another one asked if it is safe to swim in a pool with the earphones on. And so on. All these people were calling numbers without nines. In the end, Sophie put the phone into a drawer not to hear its constant ringing.

But the trouble continued. For example, the clock in the kitchen had no nine and its little hand showing seconds always hesitated a bit before the vacant place and then jumped with an unpleasant sound. The mommy's shoes, originally number nine, were growing and shrinking, not knowing which size to adopt.

"What are we going to do?" asked Sophie.

"We have to negotiate, I think," said Tom.

So they went to the far end of the garden where all the nines were hiding.

"What are your conditions?" asked Tom adopting the role of the negotiator,

"We want recognition," cried one of the nines. "And an apology."

"OK, I apologize," said Sophie.

"It's not enough, you have to recognize our identity," said one very fiercely. "You have to say our name."

There was quite a long while of tense silence.

"Nine," said Sophie reluctantly, in a very soft voice.

"Aloud!" cried all the nines.

"Nine!" shouted Sophie very loudly.

And so the riot among numbers ended. All nines returned to their duties and everything went back to normal.

“I still don’t like nine,” said Sophie softly, sitting with Tom on the porch.

“You needn’t like it. Just try to show some respect,” said Tom.

And he closed his eyes returning to much more important things he had to think about.

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The Parrot

Everybody likes to have friends. Well, almost everybody. When I was a little boy, I had not much luck with friends. One of them, a kid of my age who was called Bobo for some reason although his given name was Damian or something like that, was quite tiresome when we were playing together with a building set. He always wanted to build something larger than what I did and was constantly stealing various building segments from me. I didn't notice it at first and was baffled by the fact that my own building was shrinking in spite of my effort whereas his was growing. I had a weird feeling that I was building down instead of up, which was a rather curious thing. Then, one day, I understood what was going on.

"How come you have so many peaces and I have almost none?" I asked one day.

"This is because my building is much more important," he said.

"Who said so?"

"Mine is the seat of the Congress and yours is a public bathroom," he said.

Well, I didn't want to build public bathrooms although they can be sometimes more important than a Congress, so I broke the friendship.

Some time afterwards, I wanted to make friends with a dog our neighbor had. To be frank, it was not much of a dog, it looked rather like a worn-down broom without a handle and it was not exactly clean. Our neighbor, an old lady who had some likeness to the dog although she had much less hair on her face, took the dog four times a day to the near park where it must have had some important business because they went there regularly without respect to the weather. The dog always came out first and barked at me all the time the lady looked for her keys or an umbrella or her old bag which she always took with her. It's rather weird when a broom barks at you so I tried to make friends with the dog. At first, I had the feeling that the dog tries to tell me something. So I barked back but not having known the dog language I probably used some improper words because the dog answered rather furiously. Then I remembered that the dogs always sniff at each other when meeting so I kneeled down and started sniffing at it. Well, I certainly cannot recommend it. The dog stank horribly and, to make the things worse, it tried to bite my nose off. Luckily, my nose was much shorter than it is nowadays so I kept it but I lost a prospective friend. Afterwards, I never tried to sniff at anybody whom I tried to make friends with.

But I got lost in my memories again. What I wanted to tell you was the case of a parrot. Yes, you are right, there was no parrot in the household originally, only Sophie and Mom and Dad and Tom who originally did not belong to it either, but he simply came one day and remained there. Nevertheless that day I am talking about, Sophie brought a large cage with a colorful parrot inside. Mommy and Daddy were somewhere else in the house so there was only Tom on the porch, lost in his deepest thoughts. Tom was a very intelligent cat who sometimes talked if he was in a mood... What? You know that already? OK, you have a better memory than I, no need to rub it in. Where was I? Yes, Sophie brought a cage with a parrot inside and put it on the table.

"What's this?" asked Tom in a not very amiable tone.

"Don't you recognize a cage with a bird?"

"How do you mean, a bird? This freak has any color I can think of and some others more. No respectable bird would show itself outside wearing such apparel."

"What do you want, it's a parrot," said Sophie.

"Parrot," said the bird making the r very expressive.

"See? It's a talking parrot," said Sophie. "It belongs to Alice, my friend. She had to go with her parents to buy some new shoes or something and didn't want to leave him alone because he gets depressed if he has nobody to talk to. By the way, his name is Lora."

“Lora,” said the bird making it sound rather like Lorra.

“What a weird name,” grumbled Tom. “It’s probably a she-bird.”

“Bird,” said the parrot.

“I don’t know,” said Sophie. “Anyway, you said you wanted make friends with some bird, so you have an opportunity.”

“I didn’t mean such a repeating monster,” said Tom with disgust. “It seems to me like some robot.”

“Robot,” said the parrot without much conviction.

“It’s a bird like any other,” said Sophie. “Only much wiser. They live many years, you know, and are said to have a good memory. Please, be civil to him at least. I have to go to the kitchen to get some snags for us but I’ll return soon so don’t think about any mischief.”

Sophie went away and Tom, after having ignored the parrot for some time, suddenly stood up and came closer to the cage.

“To be civil to such apparition,” he said with a smirk. “Am I supposed to make friends with this varicolored jerk which does not even speak properly?”

“Why do you talk like I were not present?” said the parrot in an offended way. “You think I don’t hear you, you dunce?”

“I thought you could only repeat words like an echo.”

“What do you expect,” said the parrot with some indignation. “I am a parrot. I am supposed to repeat words.”

“Isn’t it rather boring?” asked Tom.

“Sometimes, when I cannot stand it any more, I say something rude and people then blame each other for having taught me to say such foul things.”

“Interesting,” smiled Tom. “Could you give me some example?”

The parrot looked at him with one eye then with the other one but said nothing.

“Are you mute suddenly?” Tom teased him.

“Don’t tempt me,” said the parrot.

“I don’t believe you can really swear or anything. You are simply boasting,” said Tom and turned in the direction of the porch.

After that, the parrot started to swear and call him foul names in a way only parrots are allowed to. No, I cannot repeat it to you because it was so horrible that my tongue would get stiff from it and I would have to go into a bathroom and wash my mouth with soap several times in order to clean it. Even Tom was shocked a bit although the language used between tomcats when they meet in the street at night is not exactly what you would call formal.

“That was quite a show,” said Tom appreciatively. “I see you have a poetical mind. How can a creature with such fantasy keep living in a cage?”

“The cage isn’t so bad,” said the parrot. “I have a comfortable perch here and always a lot of seeds and nuts to eat.”

“But it prevents you to come out,” said Tom.

“It also prevents some thugs to come in,” said the parrot. “Sometimes, one has to trade freedom for safety.”

“What are you talking about? This is a free country.”

“A country of equal opportunity for everybody, by all means. For some cats, it means the opportunity to eat a parrot.”

Tom shook his head.

“What deranged fantasy you have,” he said. “There could have been some naughty cats chasing birds in the past but it is a long forgotten thing, don’t you know? This is the twenty-first century. Eating of birds is simply out. Universal brotherhood is in.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Come out and you will see.”

“I’ll not.”

“You are a coward.”

“I am,” admitted the parrot. “Besides, I cannot. The cage is closed.”

“So let’s open it.”

Tom jumped on the table and started to push the door of the cage to one side with his paw ignoring the painful pecking of the parrot’s beak. At first, it seemed impossible to open the door but, suddenly, it gave way. There was some commotion in the large opening but, the next moment, something unbelievable happened: Tom was inside the cage and the parrot, shouting curses which I certainly cannot repeat, was flying around. And, the moment next but one, the parrot was at the cage and pushed the door back with his beak. Now, Tom was caught. He soon saw that the door could not be opened from inside.

“This is the typical feat of all liberators,” he said. “How can you be so ungrateful?”

“What should I be grateful for? You attacked me.”

“I only wanted to hug you.”

“I know, in order to bite my head off.”

“Your head? It’s too red.”

“It would be redder after your act of friendship.”

“You misunderstand me,” said Tom sadly.

For the parrot there was probably the same taste of danger in the word understanding as it was in all proclamations of friendship because he flew far from the cage.

“There can be no understanding between a bird and a cat,” he said.

“How sad,” Tom said. “If not tragic.”

The parrot looked at him with one eye, then with the other. It looked like he smiled although it is difficult to say if a parrot is serious or not.

“You may mean well but I’m too old to believe it,” he said. “Anyway, there are sad times awaiting you when the girl comes back.”

Which happened the next moment. Sophie, who came back with some cookies and a bowl of milk, looked at the cage with apprehension.

“Tom!” she exclaimed. “Where is the bird?”

“Bird,” said Tom making the r roll the same way the parrot did.

“Do you mean you are the parrot?”

“Lora,” said Tom trying to look like a parrot.

Sophie looked around and saw with great relief the parrot sitting on a lamp. At first, she thought Tom gobbled the parrot up.

“OK,” she said. “If you are the parrot then the other fellow must be Tom. So I am going to give the cookie and milk to him.”

“Er, I am not exactly a parrot,” said Tom.

“How do you mean?”

“I am rather a cat. Or to put it bluntly, I am Tom.”

Sophie looked at him in a mock wonder.

“What are you doing in the cage?”

“He lured me inside.”

“That’s a blatant lie!” exclaimed the parrot indignantly.

Sophie frowned.

“Tom! You never lied to me,” she said in an offended way.

“Well, to be quite exact, I was lured by my good intentions. I wanted to make friends with him. But he didn’t understand.”

“I understood quite well what you were up to,” said the parrot.

“What I don’t see,” said Sophie, “is why you had to open the cage if you wanted to fraternize with him.”

“Friendship means freedom,” said Tom festively. “Let’s open all cages of the world!”
Sophie smiled.

“I’m going to open your cage and let you out if you make a vow to never but really never catch and eat a bird.”

“How can I promise something which is against my nature? I am a cat, after all.”

“It’s the only way out for you,” said Sophie. “Otherwise I’ll return you with the cage to Alice and you will have to repeat words like a parrot.”

“OK, I promise. Anyway, I prefer cookies.”

And so it ended. Sophie opened the cage, Tom rushed out and the parrot flew in. It found a comfortable position on the perch and dropped – well, the thing birds are dropping.

“Lora,” it said.

Sophie took the cage and carried it out of the house. When they were just at the door, the parrot looked at Tom with one eye and poured him over with a stream of such horrible curses that I cannot repeat them even in a soft voice.

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The Mystery of the Diamond Bracelet

Do you like mystery stories? True, they are meant for adults but some could be for children, too. Usually, they start with some crime, I am sorry to say. There are various crimes, some of them really horrible, but stealing is a crime too and this is what I want to talk about this time.

In a classical mystery story, some crime is done and the police are summoned to the place. Its expected role is to find out who did it and, eventually, to catch the villain and hand him over to the justice which should punish him. Traditionally, the police are a bunch of mentally retarded people who reel around the place, stubbornly follow false clues, interrogate everybody except themselves and, sooner or later, accuse somebody who didn't do it. Precisely at this very moment, a brilliant detective, always a man or a woman too ridiculous to be taken seriously, comes to the scene and finds some tiny clue everybody had overlooked. From this clue he or she unravels a very complicated path leading to the least suspicious person in the story. Some say that the culprit is always the gardener but that cannot be true because in some stories there is no garden.

There are various types of detectives, some with indispensable magnifying glass or with a ridiculous mustache which has an unclear role in their investigation. Some, I am sorry to say, even play a violin rather out of tune, which somehow aids their brainwork or possibly terrifies the culprit. But did you ever hear about a cat or dog being a detective? Well, precisely this happened in this story.

At the very beginning, I have to say that Sophie liked to wear jewels. She had a ring made of a piece of wire and an interesting stone she found at the shore of the nearby river. She often wore a necklace woven from daisies – that one in summer only, in winter some other jewel had to do. But what she liked the most was a diamond bracelet. Well, between you and me, there were no real diamonds in it, some chipmunks even rumored that it was plain glass. Nonetheless, it was a glittering thing and Sophie loved it. One day, she took the bracelet off, left it on the porch and went to the bathroom to wash her hands before her afternoon snack. What is so strange here? Sophie washed her hands from time to time, believe it or not.

When she came back, she saw with surprise and then with horror that the bracelet was missing.

“Tom,” she said in a tiny voice. “Did you see somebody coming here?”

“I wasn't looking,” answered Tom.

“But didn't you hear some steps or something?”

“I wasn't listening.”

“Are you going to tell me that you were not even smelling?” asked Sophie crossly.

“I was deep in my thoughts,” said Tom meaning that he was sleeping. No wonder, he did it most of the time. Sophie often said that he was the laziest cat she had ever seen. Well, I don't know how many cats she met in her life but Tom was lazy, that's a fact.

“I cannot understand it,” said Sophie. “I left my precious bracelet here and it disappeared.”

“You mean somebody stole it? Why should anybody do such a thing? It's just plain...”

“Don't say it,” Sophie interrupted him. “For me, it's like diamonds so it could be the same for anybody else.”

“But nobody came here, the steps would have woken me – I mean they would have interrupted my thoughts.”

“Then how do you explain that the bracelet is gone?”

“There are various possibilities,” said Tom pensively.

“Such as?”

“Er... For instance, the world is four-dimensional, isn't it. And they say there are black holes in space.”

“Don't try to be smart.”

“Ask Bernie,” growled Tom.

“I thought you disagreed with Bernie. But you are right, I'll ask Bernie. Not about the holes in space but to sniff out the thief.”

And she ran to the house where Bernie lived. She was not very surprised to find Bernie on the porch, sunk in even deeper thoughts than Tom. However, when Sophie came near, Bernie twitched one ear, opened one eye and then rose his head, rather huge even for a big dog.

“Hi, Sophie,” he said. “How are you doing in this impossible world?”

He was fond of Sophie even though she went about with this horrid show-off Tom.

“Not very well,” said Sophie. “I need you.”

“What's up?”

“Somebody must have stolen my diamond bracelet from our porch. Tom seems to be of no use. So I came to ask you to sniff the thief out.”

Bernie stood up and stretched his legs.

“I don't know,” he said dubiously. “My smell is not what it used to be.”

“But to sniff out a stinking thief?” asked Sophie.

“He may not be stinking in that sense,” murmured Bernie. “But I'll try. Lead me to the exact place where the bracelet was lying.”

So they came to the porch of Sophie's house.

“Hi, Bernie,” said Tom who woke up reluctantly. “How much has the world expanded since we met last time?”

“I don't know,” said Bernie good-naturedly. “But I hear it is rather stuffed with mice. There are rumors some mouse gangs are chasing poor cats but I don't believe it.”

“You are right not to,” said Tom. “Go ahead and sniff the porch. But be careful no to slobber too much. I am not a swimmer, you know.”

Sophie showed Bernie the exact place where she originally left the bracelet. Bernie sniffed it very thoroughly.

“Umph,” he said. “Very interesting. Umph. Somewhat familiar.”

After that, he ran into the garden, his nose down to the grass. Sophie with Tom observed his complicated trajectory which seemed to follow very strange ornaments. In the end, Bernie ran back to the porch, right to Sophie.

“Here,” he said, out of breath.

“This is Sophie, you dunce,” said Tom with scorn. “Do you mean she stole her own bracelet?”

“Huh? Oh yea, I caught a false scent. Fresh start.”

He sniffed the place again, then lifted his muzzle and went into the garden again sniffing the air this time. At one moment, he even stood up on his hind legs.

“What is he doing?” wondered Sophie.

“It looks like he is training a little dance,” growled Tom. “Maybe he wants to make a carrier in show business.”

But Bernie walked on his hind legs to a nearby tall tree, then lowered himself to the ground and returned to them.

“It's that tree over there,” he said out of breath.

“You mean the tree came here and stole the bracelet?” asked Tom with irony.

“No, you ex-cat. I mean something living up that tree. Some bird or animal, to prevent your flippant jokes.”

“Oh I see. Maybe some squirrel wanting to make its tail more decorative.”

“Wait, Tom,” said Sophie. “You said possibly a bird? I recall my Mom reading to me from some book about magpies. They are said to like glittering things and sometimes steal them. Did you see any magpie in the garden, Tom?”

“I don’t know.”

“He is more interested in pies.” said Bernie.

“That’s not the reason, you overgrown imitation of a dog,” said Tom tartly. “I simply avoid looking at birds because Sophie made me take a vow never to attack any of them.”

“This is a different case,” said Sophie. “If a magpie is a culprit, it has to be brought to justice. But how can we find it guilty?”

“I cannot climb a tree,” said Bernie. “I could only try to bite its stem off but I doubt I could. My teeth are not what they were.”

“This will not be necessary. We have a born detective here who can climb a tree easily, haven’t we Tom?”

Tom looked at her with accusing eyes.

“You mean me?” he asked. “I would do it with pleasure. But I haven’t been quite myself lately, you know. I have a blurred vision and this pain in my right shoulder not speaking about my stomach ache.”

“You are simply lazy as usual,” said Sophie. “But you overlook the fact that detectives are always rewarded for their services.”

“Just let’s be practical,” said Tom with interest. “What kind of reward are we speaking about?”

Sophie pretended to think a while about it.

“Well, let’s say three cookies,” she said then.

“With chocolate chips in them?” asked Tom eagerly.

“So be it,” said Sophie.

Tom slowly stood up and stretched his back.

“What about your right shoulder?” asked Bernie.

“It gets better by the minute,” said Tom and stepped out of the porch.

“Wait,” called Sophie. “Shouldn’t you wear a helmet or something? Or some goggles in case the magpie attacks you?”

“I am a cat, you know,” said Tom over his shoulder. “If somebody should worry, then it must be the magpie. Unless it is as large as a condor,” he added to himself and shuddered.

“But you should have a magnifying glass,” said Bernie mockingly, “not speaking about a notebook with a pencil, like a real detective.”

“You could use the magnifying glass yourself for finding your brain,” growled Tom. “Providing that some X-ray could penetrate your thick skull.”

Tom came to the tree and started to climb up. Well, he was somewhat out of training, I am sorry to say, so that he fell down several times. Normally he would give it up but he felt the stares of both friends – anxious in the case of Sophie and mocking in Bernie. He clenched his teeth and he went up in a hurry. When he reached the first branches, it was much easier.

As he went up and up, several birds flew out of the tree and also a pair of squirrels, which had been engaged in a hide-and-seek play, found it more secure to flee to another tree. Tom climbed branch after branch but he found nothing suspicious. So he climbed still higher. At last, he saw a nest almost at the top of the tree. My goodness, he thought, should I risk it? What if some branch gives way under my weight and I will fall all the way down? Of course, as a cat, he had the inborn ability to fall on all four legs. And all cats are said to have seven lives, but he was not sure how many of them he already spent. All in all, it was rather uncivil to ask him, an intelligent cat who had much better things to do, to climb such head-turning heights...

Sophie and Bernie observed him from the porch. Seeing how high he was climbing, Sophie felt some apprehension. Was the bracelet really worth such a risk?

“What if he falls down?” she said.

“Cats always fall on their four legs,” said Bernie nonchalantly.

“It is not of much use if you fall down from a plane or a skyscraper.”

“Don’t worry. It’s only a tree.”

At that moment, they saw how Tom reached the nest at the top of the tree. There was some commotion there and, shortly after that, a magpie flew out of the nest shouting very loudly. Luckily, I don’t know the language of magpies so that I couldn’t translate what she shouted – but I am quite positive it wasn’t polite. It was rather rude, I am afraid.

“So the magpie escaped justice,” said Bernie.

“We don’t know yet if it is the culprit,” objected Sophie. “But what is Tom doing there such a long time?”

“Doing his investigation,” said Bernie complacently. “He is supposed to act as a detective and thus earn his cookies.”

At that time, Tom already started to climb down. When he jumped to the ground, they saw that he had something glittering in his mouth.

“He found it!” Sophie exclaimed.

Tom came to her and handed her the bracelet.

“You are an excellent detective,” said Sophie.

“And?”

“And a bravest cat I know. But what is this yellow smear on the bracelet?”

“You should ask that deplorable magpie,” said Tom looking sideways.

“I see you have the same yellow on your lips and whiskers. And a chip of a shell on your nose.”

“Well...”

“Don’t say these are the remnants of eggs,” said Sophie sternly.

“Well, I tried to arrest the culprit and some eggs got broken in the process. It seemed to be an unnecessary waste to leave them there.”

“Murderer!” shouted Sophie. “You took a vow not to kill a bird!”

“Don’t be fanatic,” Tom growled. “An egg is not a live bird.”

“But it could be one.”

“Who can say?” said Tom. “So much in the world is a matter of chance. But some things should be predictable. For instance, the promised reward for a difficult job.”

Sophie looked at him for a while, quite unable to speak. Then she turned and went to the kitchen for the promised cookies. And this is the end of the Mystery of a Diamond Bracelet.

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